



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS

WEDNESDAY — 29 DEC 2021



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Events, Opportunities

HEADLINE	12/28 Worry: winter weather Covid case spike
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/covid-case-spike-concerns-snow-cold/281-611b2d7e-2ad3-4964-9f83-c7b4bdb1c569
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA, Wash. — Along with road closures, flight cancellations and impassable driveways, Washington State Health Secretary Dr. Umair Shah is concerned about what impact the recent winter storms might have on the state's COVID-19 caseload.</p> <p>"It concerns me," Shah said Tuesday. "I cannot say that I'm going to have any respite from this until you know, a few weeks after the new year, because we've got a lot of things stacking up."</p> <p>The bad weather closed a number of testing clinics in King County Monday.</p> <p>Shah said as long as it's safe, someone can drive out of their area to get a test if they are concerned about a recent exposure or symptoms.</p> <p>Otherwise, Shah said, those concerned about possibly having COVID should isolate at home or at least wear masks around others.</p> <p>"I think the weather has thrown a wrench into things. But remember, this weather is going to pass," said Shah. "This is really important for us to just keep all those tools in mind, especially as we get to New Year's."</p> <p>Shah said despite Mother Nature's plans, the same rules apply for preventing the spread of COVID.</p> <p>For those attending end-of-the-year celebrations, Shah recommended keeping gatherings small and wearing masks when inside or close to other guests.</p> <p>"2021 was hard. We want to put it behind us. This weather that's kicking our tails right now, we want to put that behind us" said Shah. "As you are commemorating, as you're celebrating it, celebrate responsibly. You know, all the things that you can do to keep yourself and your loved ones protected – let's do those things."</p> <p>According to the latest figures released by the Washington State Department of Health (DOH) on Monday, the number of COVID cases continues to rise in Washington. On Christmas Eve, Washington reported 6,235 new COVID-19 cases, which is a record number of new daily cases, according to DOH data.</p> <p>While the hospitalization rate has plateaued, Jacqueline Barton True, a vice president with the Washington State Hospital Association, said the icy conditions are causing staff shortages.</p> <p>"It exacerbates staffing concerns for our already very full hospitals when staff can't make it in for their shifts," said Barton True. "Overall we're seeing a big increase in omicron, and throughout the pandemic, we have seen hospitalizations lag infections. We're concerned what this rise in cases coupled with holiday gatherings will mean for statewide capacity in the weeks to come."</p> <p>The state's death rate attributed to COVID cases has dropped from the recent peak in the early fall, but Shah said that can be a misleading figure as well.</p> <p>"Deaths, that is a lagging indicator; it comes later," said Shah. "So we cannot, under any stretch of the imagination, we cannot let off the guard. We have to do everything we can."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Covid testing sites severely strained
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/covid-testing-sites-severely-strained-across-puget-sound/DCQRRKAZNEIVEH56XCRW72C4M/

GIST	<p>Finding a COVID-19 test throughout Western Washington is becoming more difficult by the day.</p> <p>“It’s a madhouse everywhere,” says Sandi Rossi, who waited in a testing line with her husband Tuesday.</p> <p>The backups are due to a perfect storm between the pre-holiday rush and the post-holiday surge, and now extreme weather is hitting the area.</p> <p>Now many sites are requiring appointments, but even that has been a struggle for some people.</p> <p>“I was supposed to have an appointment in Bonney Lake, but that location was closed today because of hazardous weather conditions,” says Amanda Giles, who has been trying to get a COVID-19 test.</p> <p>Many people who have tried to get a test earlier this week were forced to either wait for hours or try to get tested another day.</p> <p>Now, more winter weather is forcing the closure of many sites Wednesday, which will likely create an even larger backup.</p> <p>“There were no tests available,” says Kari Hartkorn, who has been trying for days to get one. “My test was canceled yesterday, so I’m back here today.”</p> <p>Zach McKenzie, who has also been trying to get tested, says, “I waited outside a couple places for a while to try to get tested, but I think it’s easier to make an appointment and just come in.”</p> <p>The good news is that King County has secured 300,000 rapid tests, with the first 100,000 arriving in just two weeks.</p> <p>While that’s not enough to meet the demand, it could lighten the load on sites across the region.</p> <p>“It’s difficult when I just want to be careful,” says Giles. “But I know we’re all in this together, and there’s snow on the ground, and there’s so many people wanting to get tested right now.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Alaska Airlines urges: reconsider flights
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/alaska-airlines-urges-passengers-consider-rescheduling-holiday-flights/Z5RMKXUONND2VOHZXZIPEQLZUY/
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Holiday travel is such a mess at Sea-Tac Airport that on Tuesday, Alaska Airlines said passengers who don’t have to fly between now and Sunday should consider rescheduling.</p> <p>The airline says with more snow coming and staffing problems, it’s taking at least three days to rebook passengers.</p> <p>Hold times on Alaska’s reservation lines are now pushing 20 hours as people try to rebook after canceled flights.</p> <p>Planes and workers are scattered because of the winter storm, and the airline doesn’t expect to have enough seats in the coming days to move everyone who wants to go.</p> <p>“We will not get our hopes up until we are wheels up,” said Kaitlin Vintertun, who was trying to get to Alaska with her husband and son to visit family.</p> <p>“We’ve been trying to get out since Sunday,” she said on Tuesday.</p> <p>By 11 a.m. Tuesday, Alaska Airlines, Sea-Tac’s largest carrier, canceled more than 150 flights for the day, with more expected.</p>

Workers handed out water to people stuck in long lines for rebooking, which were not quite as dramatic as the day before.

Still, there were plenty of stories like Chris Henry's.

"It was a lot of mayhem this morning in terms of the line, and people didn't know where to go," Henry said.

After waiting in line an hour and a half to check a bag, he missed his flight to Dallas.

"I had to get in another line to get a new flight, and I waited in that for the last three and a half hours," Henry said.

He was booked to leave nearly 12 hours after his original flight, if the plane goes at all.

Alaska Airlines said de-icing each plane is taking more than an hour, and canceling flights eases congestion.

Then there's the staffing problem.

Alaska officials said the airline had been able to backfill employees out because of COVID, but now the storm has disrupted operations to the point where all those reserves are tapped.

An [Alaska Airlines blog post](#) provides advice for passengers stuck in the mess.

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HEADLINE	12/28 WSP responds to hundreds of incidents
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/wsp-responds-to-nearly-900-incidents-280-crashes-in-king-co-because-of-snow
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - Washington State Patrol troopers have had a very busy few days.</p> <p>Trooper Rick Johnson said they have been responding non-stop to collisions and incidents involving the snow and ice since it started falling.</p> <p>In fact, Johnson said they have responded to 279 collisions and 865 incidents since the snow came.</p> <p>This is all in King County.</p> <p>Johnson did say none of the crashes have ended with serious injuries or death.</p> <p>There are also crashes involving multiple semi-trucks and passenger cars on I-90 nine miles east of the summit.</p> <p>Washington state officials say the westbound lanes are closed because of the crashes, which so far have ended with minor injuries.</p> <p>The eastbound lanes are still open, but traction tires are required.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Brutal cold continues through the week
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/weather/the-brutal-cold-continues-through-the-week
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - Hope you're able to stay cozy and warm this week. I'm worried about people who are unhoused or don't have access to heat. Brutal cold continues, particularly for the North Sound.</p>

Some snow is possible for the Central and South Cascades tonight: Snoqualmie and White Passes could stack up a fresh 1 to 3 inches of snow overnight. It's unlikely these flurries will push into the lower elevations; however, stay with us. We'll let you know if this forecast changes.

Other than that, our big headline this week is about the fresh 1 to 3 inches of snow possible for the Puget Sound lowlands late Wednesday to Thursday.

In the short-term, a Wind Advisory is posted for Mount Vernon, Bellingham and the San Juans until 4 p.m. Wednesday. Gusts to 50 mph could give way to minor damages and power outages, which can be a big problem given this harsh blast of arctic air.

There's also a Wind Chill Advisory for Western Whatcom County and the San Juans. Between 7 p.m. Tuesday and 1 p.m. Wednesday, there could be wind chills as low as ten degrees below freezing.

Limit your time outside as much as possible and make sure to dress in warm layers.

Here's a look at our overnight temps. Lows will plummet once again to the upper teens to the low 20s. It's easy to see why compact snow and ice will continue to plague side streets and neighborhood roads. Skies will clear overnight. Tomorrow, we'll wake up to extremely frigid temperatures and sunny skies.

Clouds increase Wednesday afternoon. Tomorrow will be mostly dry. Once again, highs will only lift to the 20s and low 30s.

Our next shot of lowland snow looks to arrive super late Wednesday (close to 11 p.m. to midnight). The heaviest snow looks to fall Thursday morning. This next snow event will be much faster than Sunday's. After noon on Thursday, snow may taper for the lowlands. The timing and forecast snow totals may flip-flop a little leading up to Wednesday night.

Unfortunately with Thursday's storm, there's a small chance for freezing rain. The South Coast and the I-5 corridor between Centralia and Longview could see a light layer of ice. Even minor ice accumulations on the roads can be dangerous, so know we're monitoring that potential, too.

New Year's Eve could start with freezing fog, but the sun may pop out in the afternoon. Right now, we expect dry weather as we ring in the new year. At some point on Saturday, a little lowland rain and mountain snow could move into our backyard. Stay tuned!

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HEADLINE	12/29 China warns Taiwan of drastic measures
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-warns-dramatic-measures-if-taiwan-provokes-independence-2021-12-29/
GIST	<p>BEIJING, Dec 29 (Reuters) - China will take "drastic measures" if Taiwan makes moves towards independence, a Beijing official warned on Wednesday, adding that Taiwan's provocations and outside meddling could intensify next year.</p> <p>China claims democratically governed Taiwan as its own territory and in the past two years has stepped up military and diplomatic pressure to assert its sovereignty claim, fuelling anger in Taipei and concern in Washington.</p> <p>China was willing to try its utmost to seek peaceful reunification with Taiwan but would act if any red lines on independence were crossed, Ma Xiaoguang, spokesman of the Taiwan Affairs Office, told a media briefing.</p> <p>"If separatist forces in Taiwan seeking independence provoke, exert force or even break through any red line, we will have to take drastic measures," Ma said.</p>

	<p>Taiwan has emerged as a key factor in strained relations between China and the United States, the island's most important international backer and arms supplier despite the absence of formal diplomatic ties.</p> <p>China regularly describes the island as the most sensitive issue in its ties with the United States.</p> <p>Ma said provocation by pro-independence forces and "external intervention" could grow "sharper and more intense" in coming months.</p> <p>"Next year, the Taiwan Strait situation will become more complex and severe," he said.</p> <p>Beijing has sent repeated air missions over the Taiwan Strait in recent months to pressure Taiwan. It has said it will not give in to threats.</p> <p>While the United States recognises only one China, it is required by law to provide Taiwan with the means to defend itself and has long followed a policy of "strategic ambiguity" on whether it would intervene militarily to protect Taiwan in the event of a Chinese attack.</p> <p>The defeated Republic of China government fled to Taiwan in 1949 after losing a civil war with the Communists, who established the People's Republic of China.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/29 Russia: fail to certify gas pipeline not option
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/russia-says-failure-certify-nord-stream-2-is-not-an-option-rbc-2021-12-29/
GIST	<p>MOSCOW, Dec 29 (Reuters) - Russia believes that the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline will get the necessary certification and eventually start working, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak told RBC media on Wednesday.</p> <p>Construction on the pipeline, which runs from Russia to Germany on the bed of the Baltic Sea and bypasses Ukraine, was completed in September but it lays idle while awaiting regulatory approval from Berlin and Brussels.</p> <p>The project has become increasingly politicized amid growing tensions between Russia and the West, which fears Moscow may attack Ukraine to prevent it from forging close ties with NATO. Russia denies it harbours such plans.</p> <p>The chief executive of Ukraine's state energy company Naftogaz said last month he was hopeful that the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline would not come online, saying it did not comply with European law. read more</p> <p>Asked if Russia had a "Plan B" in case Nord Stream 2 was not certified, Novak said: "We don't consider such options and we believe it will be launched in line with the timings, set for certification."</p> <p>It is expected that the certification will be completed not earlier than the end of the first half of 2022.</p> <p>He said that Russia hopes no new requirements for the project will be put forward.</p> <p>Novak also said that Russia was ready to increase gas exports to Europe, which has seen gas prices skyrocketing amid rising demand and lack of supplies, but under long-term contracts - the arrangement shunned by European companies in favour of short-term spot deals.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 South Africa recalls new Covid rules
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SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/south-africa-recalls-new-isolation-quarantine-rules-2021-12-28/
GIST	<p>JOHANNESBURG, Dec 28 (Reuters) - South Africa has recalled rules that no longer required people without symptoms of COVID-19 to isolate or test if they have been in contact with a positive case, the government announced on Tuesday, saying an amended circular will be re-issued.</p> <p>Last week the health ministry said that asymptomatic individuals who had been in contact with a case of COVID-19 no longer had to isolate but should monitor for symptoms for 5-7 days and avoid attending large gatherings.</p> <p>It had added that only those people who developed symptoms needed to get tested and that those with mild symptoms should isolate for eight days and severe cases for 10 days.</p> <p>It had also revised protocols on quarantine, saying all quarantine facilities outside the home would be stopped, while contact tracing efforts would also be scrapped aside from in specific scenarios such as cluster outbreaks.</p> <p>The reason for the revision was based on a number of scientific factors including the fact that, most people have vaccinated with at least one vaccine dose and developed some level of immunity. This has contributed to the current low hospitalisation and high recovery rates, the department said.</p> <p>Now all those protocols will be recalled after the Department of Health was inundated with media, stakeholders and public enquiries and comments following the release of the revised regulations.</p> <p>"In line with the principles of transparency and openness, the department has decided to put the implementation of the revised policy changes on hold, while taking all additional comments and inputs received into consideration," it said in a statement.</p> <p>"This means the status quo remains, and all prior existing regulations with regards to contact tracing, quarantine and isolation remain applicable."</p> <p>The country has led the continent in terms of COVID-19 cases and deaths as well as vaccinations, with 3.42 million cases reported and 90,854 fatalities.</p> <p>Its experience has been closely watched around the world after it was among the first countries to identify the more transmissible Omicron variant.</p> <p>Cases started declining this week, with 7,216 new cases and 25 deaths reported in the past 24 hours.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/29 Spain rules out new omicron restrictions
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-lifestyle-business-health-travel-5dce55ab9279f3c3d9c8d7525cab3a17
GIST	<p>MADRID — Spain's prime minister has ruled out any immediate national restrictions in response to the omicron variant of the coronavirus.</p> <p>Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez said official data shows that even though omicron spreads more quickly, it has generally caused milder symptoms and therefore put less pressure on Spain's hospitals than previous strains. He also cited the country's high vaccination rate of over 80%.</p> <p>"It's clear that we are in a situation radically different," Sánchez told reporters during his year-end press conference. "We are better and more prepared to confront the omicron variant."</p> <p>Sánchez confirmed that a panel of regional chiefs and central health authorities would debate a proposal to shorten the mandatory isolation period for individuals who test positive but display no COVID-19 symptoms.</p>

	<p>Spanish authorities are considering reducing the period from 10 to five days, following the United States, Greece and other countries. Staff absences due to the virus have canceled trains and led to other service disruptions in Spain.</p> <p>Health Ministry data showed Spain confirmed 100,000 new infections on Tuesday, bringing the 14-day infection rate to 1,360 cases per 100,000 residents, nearly twice the level from a week earlier.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/29 Gaza violence: Palestinian head in Israel
SOURCE	https://news.trust.org/item/20211229114926-zo3f8
GIST	<p>JERUSALEM, Dec 29 (Reuters) - An Israeli was wounded in a shooting attack on the Gaza border on Wednesday, the military said, after a rare visit to Israel by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas drew condemnation from the enclave's Hamas rulers.</p> <p>The Israeli military said it responded to the shooting with tank fire, targeting Hamas posts in the northern Gaza Strip. Gaza health officials said three Palestinian farmers were wounded.</p> <p>Israel's Defence Minister Benny Gantz hosted Abbas in his home late on Tuesday, the Western-backed Palestinian leader's first such visit to Israel in more than a decade, although it signalled few prospects for any resumption of long-stalled peace negotiations.</p> <p>Following their talks, the Israeli Defence Ministry announced a series of what it described as "confidence-building measures" that would ease the entry of hundreds of Palestinian business people to Israel.</p> <p>In Gaza, Hazem Qassem, a Hamas spokesman, said that by meeting Gantz, Abbas was "deepening Palestinian political divisions" and encouraging accommodation with "the occupation", a term the Islamist militant group uses to describe Israel.</p> <p>There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the shooting attack from Gaza, which the Israeli military said slightly wounded the civilian. The border has been largely quiet since an 11-day war between Israel and Gaza militants in May.</p> <p>'POLITICAL HORIZON'</p> <p>Abbas and Gantz last met in August, in the occupied West Bank. Palestinian official Hussein al-Sheikh said that at Tuesday's talks they discussed the "importance of creating a political horizon" for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.</p> <p>Gantz, in his summation of the meeting on Twitter, made no mention of a peace process, stalled since 2014 after U.S.-backed talks collapsed. Palestinians seek to establish a state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital.</p> <p>"We discussed the implementation of economic and civilian measures, and emphasised the importance of deepening security coordination and preventing terror and violence - for the well-being of both Israelis and Palestinians," Gantz wrote.</p> <p>Israel's multi-party government is deeply divided over the statehood issue. Palestinian rivalries remain strong, with Hamas, which has fought four wars with Israel, running the Gaza Strip.</p> <p>In a move that could ease travel for thousands of Palestinians, the Defence Ministry said Gantz approved registration as West Bank residents for some 6,000 people who had been living in the territory, captured by Israel in a 1967 war, without official status.</p> <p>Another 3,500 people from Gaza would also receive residency documentation, the ministry said.</p>

	The meeting followed several Palestinian attacks on Israelis in recent weeks in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Palestinians also complain of attacks by Israeli settlers.
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HEADLINE	12/29 World record Covid cases in a week
SOURCE	https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211229-world-hits-record-covid-cases-in-a-week-as-who-warns-over-omicron
GIST	<p>Paris (AFP) – The world hit a record number of Covid infections in a week, an AFP tally revealed Wednesday, as the WHO warned that Omicron poses a "very high" risk and could yet overwhelm healthcare systems.</p> <p>The highly transmissible variant has seen case records in multiple countries and registered infections were up 37 percent globally from December 22-28 compared to the previous seven-day period, according to the AFP tally based on national databases.</p> <p>A total of 6.55 million cases were detected between 22-28 December, the highest figures since the World Health Organization declared a pandemic in March 2020.</p> <p>The surge, currently worst in Europe, has forced governments to walk a tightrope between re-imposing restrictions designed to stop hospitals becoming overwhelmed and the need to keep economies and societies open two years after the virus first emerged in late 2019.</p> <p>Studies suggest Omicron, now the dominant strain in some countries, carries a reduced risk of being admitted to hospital, but the World Health Organization still urged caution.</p> <p>"The overall risk related to the new variant of concern Omicron remains very high," the UN health agency said overnight.</p> <p>"Consistent evidence shows that the Omicron variant has a growth advantage over the Delta variant with a doubling time of two to three days."</p> <p>More than 5.4 million people around the world have died from Covid-19, but the number of deaths declined to an average of 6,450 a day in the last week, the AFP tally said, the lowest since late October 2020.</p> <p>Painful restrictions</p> <p>The WHO warned further data was needed to understand Omicron's severity.</p> <p>Its rapid growth "will still result in large numbers of hospitalisations, particularly amongst unvaccinated groups, and cause widespread disruption to health systems and other critical services", warned WHO Europe's Covid Incident Manager Catherine Smallwood.</p> <p>More than 3.5 million cases have been recorded in Europe in the last seven days, with Britain, France, Greece and Portugal all reporting record daily case numbers.</p> <p>France on Wednesday extended by another three weeks the closure of nightclubs -- with financial aid to help mitigate the loss of business over the Christmas and New Year period.</p> <p>"I can imagine the distress for these employees and entrepreneurs," Tourism Minister Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne told France Inter radio.</p> <p>French lawmakers were on Wednesday to start debating a new law that will only allow those vaccinated -- and no longer accept proof of a negative Covid test -- to enter restaurants, cinemas, museums and other public venues.</p>

Germany, Europe's biggest economy, has forced sports competitions behind closed doors and also shut nightclubs, limiting private gatherings to 10 vaccinated people -- or two households where any unvaccinated people are present.

New Year's Eve cancelled

On Wednesday, Vietnam, an export-reliant economy long seen as a success story in Asia, reported economic growth for 2021 at a 30-year low of just 2.58 percent, as the pandemic continues to take a toll.

Armed police in Jingxi in southern China, near the border with Vietnam, paraded four alleged violators of Covid rules through the streets, state media reported, a practice that was banned but which has resurfaced in the struggle to enforce a zero-Covid policy.

Covid spikes caused severe travel disruptions over the holidays, with thousands of flights cancelled worldwide and Finland on Tuesday saying it would bar unvaccinated foreign travellers from entering.

They are also threatening sports events again.

England's top football league is grappling with record cases, while China has imposed strict lockdowns on millions of people to control the spread of the Delta variant ahead of the Beijing Winter Olympics.

Mexico City's mayor on Tuesday cancelled the capital's massive New Year's Eve celebrations as a preventative measure after a rise in Covid-19 cases.

"I want to get rid of Covid and quarantines," said teacher Robin Myers as New Yorkers marked "Good Riddance Day" -- burning pieces of paper representing their worst memories of 2021.

"So that my kids can be normal again and see their friends and be out and be social."

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HEADLINE	12/29 CDC: 3 more countries highest travel risk
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/cdc-very-high-risk-travel-destinations-december-28/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN) — The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Tuesday added three destinations in Europe -- from its frigid northern climes to its sun-soaked south -- to its highest-risk category for travel. In its weekly update of Covid-19 travel advisories, the CDC advised against travel to the following countries and placed them in its "Level 4: Covid-19 Very High" category:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Malta• Moldova• Sweden <p>The CDC places a destination at Level 4 when more than 500 cases per 100,000 residents are registered in the past 28 days.</p> <p>Sweden, the popular Scandinavian nation, was previously at Level 3, considered "high risk." It now joins fellow Nordic nations Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway at Level 4. On Tuesday, Sweden began requiring a negative Covid-19 test result for foreigners to visit, regardless of vaccination status.</p> <p>The island nation of Malta, a Mediterranean favorite, was also at Level 3 last week.</p> <p>Far off the radar of most tourists, the eastern European nation of Moldova had previously been in the "Unknown" category. The CDC places destinations in that category when it doesn't have enough reliable data to make an assessment.</p> <p>Europe's continuing woes</p>

In another troubling sign for Europe's Covid-19 situation, the CDC moved no destinations on that continent to a lower level in the past week.

Other big travel names that remain lodged at the CDC's Level 4 include:

- **France**
- **Germany**
- **Greece**
- **Ireland**
- **Italy**
- **Netherlands**
- **Portugal**
- **Spain**
- **United Kingdom**

In fact, the United Kingdom has been at Level 4 since July 19.

However, Europe isn't the only continent with popular tourist destinations on Level 4. Among the other places also considered at "very high" risk for travel are:

- **Belize**
- **Jordan**
- **Singapore**
- **South Africa**
- **Turkey**

In all, almost 90 destinations were rated Level 4 as of December 28. You can view the CDC's risk levels for global destinations on its [travel recommendations page](#).

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HEADLINE	12/28 Cold, flu or Covid-19?
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/28/health/is-it-cold-flu-or-covid-wellness/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)Do you have a sore throat, a runny nose and muscle aches? It could be a common cold, a case of the flu -- or Covid-19.</p> <p>The illnesses all share similar symptoms, sometimes making it hard to distinguish which is putting you under the weather.</p> <p>Case rates of Covid-19 have been on the rise as the Omicron variant has spread, but hospitalization numbers appear to be staying relatively low. For vaccinated people, evidence suggests that infection with this variant seems less likely to be severe, epidemiologist and former Detroit Health Department executive director, Dr. Abdul El-Sayed said.</p> <p>"The important thing to remember is a vaccine is like giving a 'be on the lookout' call to your immune system. So its capacity to identify, target and destroy viruses is so much higher every time we take another boost of the vaccine," El-Sayed said. "It makes sense that the symptoms you would experience are milder if you have been vaccinated."</p> <p>That does not mean, however, that infections shouldn't be taken seriously, he added, especially when considering the risk of overwhelming health care systems.</p> <p>"Just because the per-individual risk of severe illness may be lower, that doesn't mean on a societal level Omicron doesn't pose a real risk," he said. "Even a small proportion of a relatively large number can be a relatively large number."</p> <p>Many Covid-19 infections may look like a cold or flu. The best way to know is to get a test, said Dr. Sarah Ash Combs, attending physician at Children's National Hospital.</p>

"Short of getting a test, I would say it's really tricky to distinguish right now," Combs said. "We need to just treat cold-ish symptoms in pretty much the same bucket" as Covid-19.

What symptoms to look for

Early signs of cold, flu and Covid-19 tend to be similar, El-Sayed said.

Both Covid-19 and the flu often cause symptoms such as fever, fatigue, body aches, sore throat, shortness of breath and vomiting or diarrhea, according to the [US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov/disease/index.html).

Covid-19 infection can be distinguished, however, by the headache and dry cough that often go along with it. The loss of taste and smell that has been the biggest warning sign of a Covid-19 infection is still a possible symptom, though it is less prevalent now than it has been with other variants, El-Sayed said.

"For people who are feeling serious chest pain, particularly with a dry cough that has gotten worse, that's when you really ought to seek medical attention," he warned.

The most important factor to consider is exposure.

"If you are starting to feel any of these symptoms, it's worth asking: Has anybody with whom I've come into contact been infected with Covid? It's also worth isolating and taking a rapid test," he advised.

Even if you're not feeling symptoms yet, it may be best to exercise caution if you have been around someone who tested positive for Covid-19.

"I do think it is worth keeping a high suspicion that it could be Covid considering that we have the Omicron variant spreading like wildfire," El-Sayed added.

When to test for Covid-19

It is often good to address your suspicions of Covid-19 by taking a test, although when you do it makes a difference.

If you are feeling symptoms, now is the time to take a test, El-Sayed said.

For those who have been exposed but aren't feeling symptoms, there is a possibility that the virus hasn't developed enough to show up on a rapid test, he explained. In those cases, it is best to wait five days after exposure before testing and to remain on the lookout, according to the CDC.

"Just because you get a negative test doesn't necessarily mean it's not Covid," El-Sayed said. "The best approach is to test and then maybe test again in 12 to 24 hours, and if you get two negatives, you can be more certain that it's not."

Whether it is Covid-19 or the common cold, it has always been a good idea to isolate while you fight a viral illness, he said. It has become even more important with the risk of spread increasing with Covid-19.

What to do if your child starts sniffing

Looking ahead to the return to school after the winter break, the US is at a point where people need to treat cold or flu symptoms the same as Covid-19, Combs said.

When a family comes into her emergency room with a child that has sniffles and a sore throat and asks what it is, she is honest: She can't know for sure without a test, said Combs.

Children are experiencing Omicron much in the same way adults are in that the symptoms are much more wide-ranging and often milder, like a cold, she said.

	<p>Getting a flu shot for your child is important to reduce the chance of adding another virus to the mix, Combs said. Children under 5-years-old are still waiting on vaccine approval from the US Food and Drug Administration, but those older can get vaccinated to reduce the risk of spread and serious disease.</p> <p>As they go back to a school environment, testing is going to be essential to protecting against outbreaks, Combs said.</p> <p>"If you're looking to be really careful, if you're looking at a child going back to a school environment is to spread to other people, I would say really the only way to know is taking that test," Combs said.</p> <p>The good news is we know how to manage infections when children return to school, Combs said. When it isn't clear if your child was exposed or if their test is still pending, protocols like masking, sanitizing, distancing and reducing indoor gatherings are still believed to be effective in reducing spread, she added.</p> <p>And know that advice may evolve as time goes on, El-Sayed cautioned.</p> <p>"It's changing quickly. We're learning a lot more," he said. "Omicron is a variant we've really only known for about a month."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Covid, snow cancel more SEA flights
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/covid-and-snow-force-hundreds-more-flight-cancellations-at-sea-tac-airport/
GIST	<p>For yet another day, travelers anxious to fly to or from the Seattle area faced cancellations, delays, lost luggage, unexpected hotel stays and mounting frustration with the way airlines were coping — or not coping — with winter weather and pandemic-related staffing issues.</p> <p>Since the snow began coming down Sunday, more than 1,000 flights into and out of Seattle-Tacoma International Airport have been canceled with hundreds more delayed. With another storm forecast for Seattle later this week, and airline industrywide staffing shortages unresolved, many travelers were bracing for days more of delays and disappointment.</p> <p>"It's just staggering," said Jason Maddocks, a Seattle resident who has been marooned with his wife, Amy, in a Houston hotel at their own expense since their Alaska Airlines flight to Seattle was canceled Sunday — and hopes to be on a rebooked flight Wednesday.</p> <p>As of late Tuesday, airlines had canceled 258 flights into or out of Sea-Tac Airport, or roughly a quarter of all flights scheduled Tuesday, according to the website FlightAware.com. Another 170 flights scheduled for Wednesday and 172 Thursday flights had also been canceled, according to the flight-tracking site.</p> <p>"We were going to meet family in Puerto Rico," said Jeff Wilcox, who had to cancel the trip he and his girlfriend had planned after realizing their Sunday red-eye flight had been delayed too long to make their connection in Atlanta.</p> <p>Tacoma resident Monica Alexander, meanwhile, spent two days waiting for her luggage after her Alaska flight to Las Vegas was canceled Sunday — only to learn Tuesday that her bags had gone on Vegas.</p> <p>"So first of all, we don't get to take our trip — and second I have a new job: chasing my bags," said Alexander, who had hoped to go to Vegas with her husband for her 60th birthday.</p> <p>Holiday air travel worldwide was thrown into chaos last week as a surge of coronavirus infections left many airlines so short-staffed that they delayed and canceled thousands of flights.</p>

At Delta, a shortage of ground crew employees at Sea-Tac contributed to delays, said a Delta flight attendant who asked not to be identified for fear of losing their job. A Delta spokesperson declined to comment on that claim.

But airline staffing problems were compounded by snow and record-low temperatures at some airports, including Sea-Tac. On Sunday, as heavy snow fell across the Puget Sound region, airlines reported more than 360 cancellations, or around 30%, of all flights at Sea-Tac Airport, according to FlightAware.

Airlines canceled another 279 flights on Monday, representing around 25% of all flights that day.

Alaska spokesperson Bobbie Egan said it was taking up to 30 minutes to “de-ice a single aircraft.” The Seattle-based airline saw more cancellations than any other carrier, with around 145, or 40%, of its Sunday flights canceled, according to FlightAware. Late Tuesday, the airline announced it would be “proactively thinning Seattle departures by about 20% to allow for the additional time ... to deice aircraft.”

Also hard-hit by cancellations and delays on Sunday were Horizon, SkyWest and Delta.

Sunday’s mass of cancellations created “a domino effect” as airlines struggled to rebook passengers on future flights while still coping with staff shortages, said Kate Hudson, spokesperson for the Port of Seattle.

Not only were stranded passengers scrambling to find new flights, but the cancellations also meant many aircraft and flight crews weren’t at the airports they’d been scheduled to depart from. “It literally will take several days to get people and planes back in position where we can put them back into rotation,” Egan said.

Delays and cancellations often meant flight crews “timed out,” or went over federal limits regarding how long they can be on duty, which meant the later flights those crews were scheduled for also had to be canceled.

“Airlines are working really hard to play catch-up with rebooking passengers and reuniting folks with their luggage, but staffing issues could bring in further delays,” Hudson said.

Although the snow has since let up in Seattle, the National Weather Service is forecasting several new inches by Thursday.

As we head into Wednesday and Thursday, we’re proactively thinning Seattle departures by about 20% to allow for the additional time it takes to deice aircraft, a requirement during winter weather.

The cold snap was also compounding concerns for Seattle-area travelers.

“We just want to get home because we got all the pets at home, plus we’re worried about the pipes in our house,” said Paul Redman, a Seattle resident who was stuck in Florida with his wife and three kids for two days after their Alaska flight back to Seattle was canceled Sunday night.

Late Tuesday afternoon, Redman was happy to report that he and his family were finally boarding a return flight, by way of Philadelphia — but not before ponying up another \$700 in hotel, taxi, and baggage fees.

Many affected passengers recognized the challenges posed by the pandemic and inclement weather — but often still blamed airlines for failing to prepare for weather issues or communicate with stranded travelers.

Many said they’d been given little help finding other flights or were forced to find (and pay for) hotel rooms while waiting for delayed or rebooked flights. Most said they’d been unable to speak with an actual customer service representative.

“Last night, I was on hold for three hours,” said Miles Mahon, a Seattle resident whose flight home from Boston was canceled and who was given an estimated wait time to speak with an Alaska agent of 21 hours and 33 minutes.

Egan, the Alaska spokesperson, acknowledged that the airline had been unable to respond to passengers’ queries in anything approaching a timely fashion.

Despite “working around the clock” to answer calls, “the number of guests impacted far surpasses our ability to handle them in as quick and timely manner as we would like,” Egan said. “It is not our finest moment and we feel terrible about the situation.”

Delta spokesperson Joe Warpinski said “we apologize to our customers for the delay in their travels,” but declined to comment on specific customer complaints about long hold times.

Not all passenger ire was directed toward airlines.

Nancy Cook, of Astoria, Oregon, said her flight into Seattle from New Orleans arrived as planned Monday— minus her baggage. But when she tried to book a Lyft to Tacoma, where she’d parked her car, the price she was quoted was nearly \$350. “It was pretty crazy,” said Cook, who ended up taking a bus to Tacoma — for \$3.25.

Still, many affected travelers and would-be travelers were trying to keep things in perspective.

“This could be so much worse,” allowed Alexander, the Tacoma woman whose Vegas flight was canceled. Despite her missing luggage, she wasn’t stranded or living in a hotel.

“I consider us blessed not to have those situations,” she said. “I just want my stuff back.”

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HEADLINE	12/28 Coming to terms: Covid is here to stay
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/covid-is-here-to-stay-heres-how-were-coming-to-terms-with-that/
GIST	<p>ATLANTA — As the Omicron variant spreads quickly, Nilah Mazza of Woodstock, Georgia, recently sat down at the computer to come up with a 2022 mantra to help keep her anxiety in check in the new year.</p> <p>The mother of four elementary-aged children reflected on those early, distressing days of the new virus taking hold in 2020, demanding changes to every aspect of life. Over time, she took the virus in stride, only to find herself in late November 2021 obsessively checking the latest news report on the new highly mutated variant.</p> <p>Despite the difficulties, it seemed for a time that with lockdowns, masks and a vaccine, the world could beat it back. Losing that hope has been hard.</p> <p>Heading into a third year of the pandemic, with yet another spike in cases and a new, more contagious variant arriving with the holidays, there seems to be no end in sight for the uncertainty and unpredictability. Adapting to the coronavirus has become a way of life.</p> <p>Words to try to live by in 2022 came to Mazza: “Have No Fear,” she tapped out on the computer.</p> <p>“I am not going to say the fear is gone. I am not going to say I will live my life without caution,” said Mazza. “But I have to let some of that go. I want to be more present for my kids. I want my kids to have normalcy.”</p>

Dr. Lateefah Watford, a psychiatrist in the Behavioral Health Department at Kaiser Permanente of Georgia, said the pandemic has forced changes to every aspect of our life — from how and where we work to who cares for our children to how we worship or spend time with loved ones. Society has adapted with Zoom calls, working from home, gathering outside, wearing masks. All that change means people have become more flexible and can respond better going forward.

Watford and other experts agree, we can no longer expect life to return to pre-COVID normal.

“I think for me as a psychiatrist and a person, as a parent and wife, I have to step back and say this is where we are, and I can only say what’s going on right now. What’s normal before is never going to be normal again and that’s OK,” said Watford. “To accept that, and not think this time it’s going to be over and going away, it’s just not. And truly acknowledging that will help us move forward.”

Case in point: Watford has planned a trip to the Dominican Republic early next year. She realizes the pandemic has created a checklist of required documents and has made traveling more complicated. Vaccinated, she is prepared to get tested before and after the trip. She’ll monitor her destination and airline for any special requirements.

“I’m planning the trip the best way I can,” she said of her lengthy preparations. “But it no longer throws me off.”

Experts say the same coping tips recommended during challenging times are still valid but maybe more important than ever during a pandemic. Watford said it’s important people take time to care for themselves to help reduce stress and avoid burnout. That means, she said, making a commitment every day to carve out something you enjoy doing — such as exercising, reading, cooking. Mindfulness can also be helpful. And many experts point to a practice of gratitude and focusing on what we have and what we can do, not on what we don’t and can’t.

Keeping social connections are also important.

Meanwhile, even as people try to move forward and accept the reality of the lasting pandemic, the toll of the past several months has been grueling, even traumatic. Loved ones have died. More than 26,000 people have died in Georgia alone. Many people who caught the virus are dealing with a constellation of long-haul symptoms. Many kids have returned to school but are still reeling from pandemic-induced isolation and academic gaps.

“I’m encouraging my patients to give themselves grace,” Watford said. “No one says let’s have a pandemic that will kill millions of people and destroy everything we thought as normal. To think you were not affected is ridiculous. Allow yourself to acknowledge how the pandemic has truly impacted you and allow yourself time to heal.”

Alyza Berman, an Atlanta psychotherapist, said while people still worry about COVID-19 affecting their physical health, “It seems like a majority are more worried about their mental health; how they were affected by quarantine and being isolated. People have to live with this anxiety and uncertainty of the new year but what I hear from every client and every staff member is, ‘I hope we don’t shut down ever again.’”

Mazza said almost a year of online school was “traumatic” for her children. They are struggling to make up ground academically.

Her 9-year-old daughter, she said, had a love for her school before the pandemic and everything shut down. Now that she’s back in school, “the love has not yet come back. She’s still recovering.”

Mazza has moments of worry, especially after the latest variant emerged. But if anything, she is more nonchalant about COVID-19. She and her children caught the coronavirus in April. They have not gotten vaccinated yet. “I am not saying not ever, just not now. I am watching this very closely,” she said.

	<p>Berman said many people have felt a profound sense of loss and have moved through the five stages of grief as they come to terms with the pandemic.</p> <p>“At first when the pandemic first hit we were in denial, and then anger, bargaining and depression to now, we have some level of acceptance,” she said.</p> <p>As a mother to four children, all of whom have chronic health conditions, Leah Ashe of Acworth said she feels like she and her family might have been better prepared than most for coping with the stress and worry of the pandemic.</p> <p>Even before the first coronavirus cases emerged, Ashe said she and her husband were conscientious about keeping their children safe and already living with the daily worry of hospitalization and severe illness.</p> <p>When the pandemic first hit, Ashe said the family turned to game nights and invested in bikes and electric scooters for the kids, and they enjoyed outside activities in the community. Ashe said priorities shifted, and the family spent less time cleaning, more time doing fun things together as a family.</p> <p>Once she and her husband got vaccinated this past spring, they felt more comfortable going out, resuming date nights. They went on evening strolls and ordered takeout and set up a folding table for romantic picnics outside, including once by a lake in Acworth.</p> <p>“The pandemic has definitely made me realize that it’s the relationships that are the most important thing,” she said. “And it’s really put things in perspective. I know it sounds very cheesy but it’s definitely very true.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Bellevue College shifts to remote learning
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/bellevue-college-shifts-to-remote-learning-for-most-of-january-due-to-covid-surge-in-king-county/
GIST	<p>Bellevue College will begin winter quarter classes remotely for the first four weeks of January amid a surge in COVID-19 cases reported in King County driven by the latest coronavirus variant, according to a Tuesday alert from the college’s interim president, Gary Locke.</p> <p>King County has reported an average of 1,586 COVID-19 infections a day and seen a 195% increase in cases in the past seven days, according to data from state health officials.</p> <p>“I know we all want to get back to learning and working in-person ... but the health of our community is our highest priority,” Locke wrote. Earlier this month, the University of Washington also announced it would implement remote learning for the first week of the winter quarter, although the UW also said it is “committed” to a return to in-person learning Jan. 10.</p> <p>Bellevue students should plan to attend classes remotely through the online learning platform Canvas from Jan. 3-28, even if classes are scheduled as in-person, according to the alert. Though most classes will be remote until the end of January, some students in certain courses, such as those in science health fields, may meet in person beginning in the second week of January.</p> <p>While student housing will remain open, several campus services will only be available remotely during those four weeks, according to the alert, although it wasn’t clear what services will remain accessible in person. Computer labs on campus may be available after the first week of January, the alert said, and students will receive email updates regarding closures.</p> <p>In the meantime, the president’s Cabinet and Flu team will continue to monitor COVID-19 cases and impacts on the community.</p>

	Officials are expected to announce no later than Jan. 25 a plan for returning to campus, according to the alert.
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HEADLINE	12/28 Grocery workers brace for omicron surge
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/untenable-grocery-workers-brace-for-omicron-surge/
GIST	<p>After taking several months off following a bout with COVID-19, Rachel Campos went back to work as a grocery store cashier in July with more knowledge about how to minimize the risk of contracting the disease on the job, and hopes of feeling safer.</p> <p>This week, a co-worker Campos had been in close contact with at her Ralphs location in Southern California tested positive for the virus, and she has heard of several other infections among the staff, upending any sense of control or safety as the omicron variant of the coronavirus sweeps through the U.S. with staggering speed.</p> <p>“I felt that it would be different — more measures to make sure we were OK. And there’s not,” said Campos, who finds herself anxious and paranoid at work once again.</p> <p>Workers are struggling through another winter holiday season with a COVID surge, which has not translating into more or better protections at work, several employees said in interviews. And although the pandemic has made more people aware of pressures retail workers face, not all customers are kind.</p> <p>“I just got called a ‘Nazi pedophile’ for telling someone to put on a mask,” said Kathleen Scott, who works at an Albertsons grocery store in Los Feliz, California.</p> <p>Scott said her employer has not issued new guidance amid the rise in omicron infections. Working through the pandemic has worn her and many of her co-workers down, she said, and the temporary \$5-an-hour hazard pay boost mandated by the city has expired. Scott feels they receive little support from their employer. She likened the experience to running a marathon.</p> <p>“When you get to the last three miles, you push yourself harder because you think it will be over soon,” Scott said. “We keep feeling like we got to that last mile, and then there’s another mile, and at some point you just collapse.”</p> <p>Kroger spokeswoman Vanessa E. Rosales said that the company, which owns Fred Meyer and QFC in the Seattle area, has implemented workplace safety policies since the onset of the pandemic and is making the vaccination of workers a primary focus. Employees who get fully vaccinated can receive \$100, she said.</p> <p>“We have been navigating the COVID-19 pandemic for almost two years and, in line with our values, the safety of our associates and customers has remained our top priority,” Rosales said in an emailed statement.</p> <p>Grocers are facing a double hit, said Burt P. Flickinger III, managing director of the retail consultant Strategic Resource Group. They are short staffed, in some cases because other retailers are luring away workers with signing bonuses and other perks.</p> <p>Unionized employers tend to have higher levels of worker retention because of their better benefits, Flickinger said.</p> <p>“Workers at these unionized grocers tend to be productive and loyal, whereas there’s far more turnover in restaurants, particularly in fast food,” Flickinger said.</p> <p>Last spring, Dana Spencer quit her job at Whole Foods, where she had worked for seven years. “It was getting to be an untenable work environment,” she said in an e-mail.</p>

	<p>Now, when Spencer shops at the store, she hears that it's short on workers. Sometimes customers wait 15 to 30 minutes in line to buy a few items, Spencer said.</p> <p>Spencer wasn't the only one who decided to leave the Los Angeles-area store. Nearly everyone in the department she worked in has quit Whole Foods since she left. A few went on to work at Trader Joe's, she said.</p> <p>"No one I worked with is happy, and everyone I speak to is looking for other employment," Spencer said. "This is hard, underpaid and under-appreciated work."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Apple aims to retain talent: huge bonuses
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/technology/apple-aims-to-prevent-defections-to-meta-with-rare-180000-bonuses/
GIST	<p>Apple has issued unusual and significant stock bonuses to some engineers in an effort to retain talent, looking to stave off defections to tech rivals such as Facebook owner Meta Platforms.</p> <p>Last week, the company informed some engineers in silicon design, hardware, and select software and operations groups of the out-of-cycle bonuses, which are being issued as restricted stock units, according to people with knowledge of the matter. The shares vest over four years, providing an incentive to stay at the iPhone maker.</p> <p>The bonuses, which came as a surprise to those who received them, have ranged from about \$50,000 to as much as \$180,000 in some cases. Many of the engineers received amounts of roughly \$80,000, \$100,000 or \$120,000 in shares, said the people, who asked not to be identified because the program isn't public. The perk was presented by managers as a reward for high performers.</p> <p>A representative for the Cupertino, California-based company declined to comment.</p> <p>Apple is waging a talent war with other Big Tech companies, with Meta emerging as a particular threat. Meta has hired about 100 engineers from Apple in the last few months, but it hasn't been a one-way street: Apple also has lured away key Meta employees.</p> <p>The two companies are likely to become fierce rivals in augmented- and virtual-reality headsets and smartwatches, with both planning major hardware releases over the next two years.</p> <p>The payouts aren't part of normal Apple compensation packages, which include a base salary, stock units and a cash bonus. Apple sometimes awards additional cash bonuses to employees, but the size of the latest stock grants was atypical and surprisingly timed, the people said. They were given to about 10% to 20% of engineers in applicable divisions.</p> <p>The bonus program has irked some engineers who didn't receive the shares and believe the selection process is arbitrary. The value of some of the bonuses equaled the annual stock grant given to some engineering managers. And their value stands to increase if Apple's stock price continues to rise. The shares are up 36% this year, putting the company's market capitalization at nearly \$3 trillion.</p> <p>Meta, meanwhile, has stepped up efforts to poach engineering talent from Apple's augmented reality, artificial intelligence, software and hardware engineering divisions. The social media giant, which operates Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, has dangled significant salary raises as it looks to refocus around hardware and the so-called metaverse.</p> <p>A talent drain also has hit other areas, including Apple's self-driving car team. The company needs to maintain its engineering prowess as it works on several next-generation devices, including the car, VR and AR headsets, and future versions of the iPhone.</p>

	<p>At the same time, Apple’s drumbeat to return to the office has jarred some employees, leading to engineering defections. Though the company has delayed its deadline for staff to come back, it’s taking a harder line on in-person work than some of its technology peers.</p> <p>Apple has said it expects corporate employees to work from the office at least three days per week, while hardware engineers will be required to log four or five days a week. Meta and other companies intend to be more lax with their policies amid the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>But Apple acknowledged this month that workers will likely stay at home for the foreseeable future. After scrapping its office-return deadline, Apple said it would issue \$1,000 bonuses to all corporate, retail and technical-support employees so they can purchase home equipment.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 DOD report: countering extremist activities
SOURCE	https://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20211228-dod-releases-report-on-countering-extremist-activities
GIST	<p>On 3 February 2021, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin directed a one-day stand down at all levels to hold an in-depth conversation on the values underpinning national service, the oath of office, and the importance of unit cohesion, as well as to gain a better understanding of the scope of the problem of extremist activity within the ranks.</p> <p>On 9 April 2021, Secretary Austin issued a memorandum announcing immediate actions to counter extremist activity in the Department and establishing the Countering Extremist Activity Working Group (CEAWG), which build upon the lessons learned through unit stand downs.</p> <p>The CEAWG was directed to oversee implementation of the immediate actions, including reviewing and updating the definition of prohibited activities in DoD Instruction 1325.06 (“Handling Protest, Extremist, and Criminal Gang Activities Among Members of the Armed Forces”). Per the Secretary’s approval as of 20 December 2021, the revised policy is effective immediately.</p> <p>The CEAWG also developed six recommendations and associated actions across four lines of effort: Military Justice and Policy, Support and Oversight of the Insider Threat Program, Investigative Processes and Screening Capability, and Education and Training. With the publication of the report, the Secretary directed implementation of the six recommendations and associated actions.</p> <p>The CEAWG’s work concludes with the delivery of the report and recommendations.</p> <p>In a memo to the Pentagons senior leadership, Austin said:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The overwhelming majority of the men and women of the Department of Defense serve this country with honor and integrity. They respect the oath they took to support and defend the Constitution of the United States. We are grateful for that dedication. • We believe only a very few violate this oath by participating in extremist activities, but even the actions of a few can have an outsized impact on unit cohesion, morale and readiness - and the physical harm some of these activities can engender can undermine the safety of our people. We owe the men and women of the Department of Defense an environment free of extremist activities, and we owe our country a military that reflects the founding values of our democracy. <p>Here is the report’s Executive Summary</p> <p>Executive Summary</p> <p>This report outlines ongoing work by the Department of Defense to address the threat posed by prohibited extremist activities. The Department of Defense has long prohibited Service members from actively engaging in extremist activities. Since 1969, the Department of Defense has provided policy guidance that enumerates the prohibition of specific activities, and has routinely updated its guidance to clarify</p>

prohibited activities, clarify the investigative authorities that commanders have at their disposal, and ensure that all military departments implement training on these policies.

Following a number of high-profile insider threat attacks in the early 2010s, the Department of Defense built a program to detect, deter, and mitigate such threats to the Department, its people, and its mission. In 2019, Congress directed the Department of Defense to review existing policies and capabilities with the aim of closing gaps in personnel security vetting. In 2020, the Army published a comprehensive revision of Army Command Policy (AR 600-20) which was the first of its kind to address the use of social media to support extremist activities and provided guidance to commanders for addressing prohibited activity that crosses the line into misconduct.

In February 2021, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III directed a Department-wide stand down to educate Department of Defense personnel on the threat posed by extremist activity. In April 2021, following the stand down, Secretary Austin issued a second memorandum to implement immediate actions identified by subject-matter experts within the Department of Defense (and informed by the stand down), and directed the establishment of the Countering Extremist Activity Working Group (CEAWG) to implement these urgent steps and develop additional recommendations.

This report provides background on the work completed by the Department. It also details the implementation status of the Secretary's four directed actions from April and describes the six additional recommendations and associated actions developed by the CEAWG. With the publication of this report, the Secretary of Defense has directed the implementation of the six CEAWG recommendations and associated actions.

The immediate actions were:

- Review and update DoD Instruction 1325.06, "Handling Protest, Extremist, and Criminal Gang Activities Among Members of the Armed Forces," to clarify the definition of prohibited extremist activity
- Update the Service member transition checklist
- Review and standardize screening questionnaires
- Commission a study on extremist activity in the Total Force.

The six additional CEAWG recommendations fall within the following lines of effort: Military Justice and Policy, Support and Oversight of the Insider Threat Program, Investigative Processes and Screening Capability, and Education and Training. Key recommendations include:

- Developing a comprehensive training and education plan that provides regular training on prohibited extremist activity to Department of Defense personnel, including those advancing to leadership positions.
- Reviewing and updating policies to provide notice to the Total Force and Department of Defense contractor personnel on prohibited extremist activity.
- Improving and modernizing Insider Threat programs by enhancing capabilities, maximizing information sharing, and ensuring a consistent and full understanding of any legal requirements.

— Secretary of Defense Memorandum on Countering Extremist Activities within the Department of Defense can be found [here](#).

— The Report on Countering Extremist Activity Within the Department of Defense can be found [here](#).

— The Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI) 1325.06: Handling Protest, Extremist, and Criminal Gang Activities Among Members of the Armed Forces can be found [here](#).

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HEADLINE	12/28 Syria: Israel strikes main commercial port
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/syria-accuses-israel-of-striking-its-main-commercial-port-11640705384?mod=lead_feature_below_a_pos1
GIST	Israeli missiles struck Syria's port of Latakia early Tuesday, according to the Syrian Defense Ministry, causing large fires and major damage in the second such attack on the vital facility this month.

The missiles were fired from the Mediterranean and targeted the commercial port's container yard at around 3 a.m. local time, the Syrian Defense Ministry said via the state news agency SANA. No casualties were immediately reported from the strikes, which activated Syrian air defenses, according to SANA.

Israeli analysts said the Israelis had likely targeted a military consignment. A Syrian government adviser said a shipment of Iranian military spare parts was targeted in the strike.

Israeli officials declined to comment on the Latakia attack; Israel usually doesn't confirm or deny individual strikes in Syria. Israel in recent years has regularly launched attacks on Syria that Israeli officials have said are meant to thwart military threats from Iran and its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah.

"If the strikes in Latakia were, indeed, carried out by Israel, they were presumably designed mostly to prevent the buildup of [the] Iranian's capabilities in Syria," said Chuck Freilich, a former deputy Israeli national security adviser, who said he wasn't privy to information about Tuesday's strikes. "But there is a secondary benefit of reminding the Iranians that Israel can strike at any time," he added.

Mr. Freilich said the strikes would add pressure on Iran in the continuing talks in Vienna to revive the 2015 nuclear deal by reminding them that the military option is open if negotiations fall through.

Negotiators from Iran, the U.S. and other major powers resumed talks this week to salvage the multilateral accord, which lifted most international sanctions on Iran in exchange for strict but temporary restrictions on its nuclear program. Former President Donald Trump pulled the U.S. out of the deal in 2018.

The U.S. has led the push to find a diplomatic solution to constraining Iran's nuclear capabilities. Israel, which isn't party to the talks, has taken a two pronged approach to Iran, saying a credible military threat must be presented if talks in Vienna break down. Separately, it says it must push back against Iran's efforts to expand its military foothold on Israel's doorstep to the north.

Israel has expressed fears about Iran's military buildup inside Syria, from where Israel says an attack on Israeli soil is possible if tensions with Tehran boil over.

Tuesday's strike comes three weeks after the Latakia port was subject to a smaller attack, which Damascus also blamed on Israel.

In response to questions about the first Latakia strike, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett didn't deny his country's involvement. "We're pushing back on the bad forces of this region day and night," he said earlier this month. "We won't stop for one second. This happens almost daily."

Cargo vessels owned by Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines, sanctioned by the U.S. for transporting military-related cargo for Iran, frequently stop at the port, according to data from tracker MarineTraffic.

Iranian presence at the facility "put a big target on civilian infrastructure that would not be targeted otherwise," said a U.S. official.

The strike on the port, the biggest gateway for food and other basic goods into Syria, underscores how Iran's support for the Syrian regime, while critical for its survival, can also be a liability.

Latakia's fire brigade said on its Facebook page that containers hit were stocked with electrical appliances, metal cans of powder milk, automotive spare parts and bike frames and that the attack ignited engine oil stored at the port. A firefighter was hospitalized due to smoke inhalation, it added. The governor of Latakia said Tuesday afternoon the fire was under control.

The attack also damaged a local hospital and some buildings and shops adjacent to the port, SANA said.

Israel has long avoided strikes in the area of Latakia, which hosts a Syrian air base currently operated by Russia.

	Mr. Freilich said it was unlikely that Israel would have launched the strikes without informing first the Russians who Israel sees as having played a stabilizing role in the conflict and its aftermath.
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HEADLINE	12/28 King Co. 300,000 rapid home testing kits
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3294130/king-county-covid-home-testing-kits/
GIST	<p>King County will soon be getting 300,000 COVID-19 home testing kits for residents.</p> <p>Dow Constantine, the county executive, announced the purchase Tuesday. The first 100,000 home testing kits are expected to arrive in the next two weeks, on the week of Jan. 10, with the remaining shipments soon after.</p> <p>The county has recently seen a dramatic rise in COVID-19 cases, which has increased the demand for testing. A release from Constantine's office explains that the home tests will supplement the existing testing capacity provided by Public Health — Seattle & King County and its partners.</p> <p>Find a COVID testing location in King County and additional guidance here.</p> <p>King County is working to procure additional testing kits, but has only confirmed the initial 300,000.</p> <p>As for the distribution of the 300,000 kits, areas of the county and communities “that are in the most need” will be prioritized. The public health department is also planning to get tests to community-based organizations, community health centers, senior centers, libraries, and other congregate locations.</p> <p>“Having test results in minutes, not hours, is an important part of keeping people safe and healthy during this surge of cases. These kits will help residents make swifter and more informed decisions on how to prevent further infections, and know whether to stay home,” Constantine said in a written release.</p> <p>“We know the demand for tests has increased in recent weeks and supplies are constrained, and more help is on the way from the federal and state governments. But we can’t wait. These kits will help us add capacity to our existing testing network, and help communities hardest hit by the pandemic.”</p> <p>The federal government and President Joe Biden previously announced plans to increase the home testing kit supply across the United States with the purchase of 500 million test kits.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Free NYE rides on public transport
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3294003/free-new-years-eve-rides-public-transit/
GIST	<p>For those who have plans to go out this New Year’s Eve, you’ll be able to catch a free ride on public transit in much of the Puget Sound area.</p> <p>Community Transit is suspending fare collections from 4 a.m. Friday to 4 a.m. Saturday.</p> <p>Sound Transit will offer a similar program for Link light rail and ST express buses, with fare-free rides from 4 a.m. Friday to 2 a.m. Saturday. Link light rail service will operate on an extended schedule on New Year’s Eve, with 15-minute late night service. The last southbound trip will leave Northgate Station at 1:46 a.m. The last northbound train will leave Angle Lake at 1:37 a.m.</p> <p>Sound Transit will also extend service on ST Express Routes 522, 545, 550, 554 and 594. Route 512 also operates after midnight with its regular schedule. For more details and for information about service throughout the holiday period, please visit the Sound Transit website.</p> <p>King County Metro, Pierce Transit, and the Seattle Streetcar have also suspended fare collections on Friday, Dec. 31, into Saturday, Jan. 1.</p>

	<p>“Whether you’re ringing in the New Year from home with friends and family, or planning a night on the town, we are teaming up across the region to offer free transportation and get everyone home safely this New Year’s Eve,” King County Executive Dow Constantine said in a written release. “This is our way of thanking our riders, and offering those who celebrate late into the New Year a safe alternative to getting behind the wheel.”</p> <p>This program is mostly to discourage people from drinking and driving on the holiday as they ring in the new year. But with snow and ice expected to still be on the roadways by the end of the week, public transport could be the safest way to get home.</p> <p>Masks are required on transit vehicles and while waiting for transit service.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Experts, officials: cancel New Year’s plans
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/12/28/omicron-new-years-eve/
GIST	<p>Leaders and public health experts across the country are urging Americans to scrap their New Year’s Eve plans and stay home for the second year in a row as new cases of the coronavirus spread at a record-setting pace.</p> <p>The volley of warnings serves as yet another reminder that the pandemic is far from over, with the omicron variant spurring a familiar pattern of cautions and cancellations during a time when many hoped to reclaim a sense of normalcy.</p> <p>But instead of partying like it’s 2019, officials are asking people to reconsider gatherings and other revelry to fight rising case counts, which on Tuesday hit an all-time high when the seven-day average of new infections topped 266,000.</p> <p>“Omicron and delta are coming to your party,” Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker (D) said at a news conference this week. “So you need to think twice about how many people will be gathered together, keeping social distancing if you’re at a party. And if you can’t, leave.”</p> <p>But Pritzker stopped short of imposing new restrictions or shutting down big events, such as the fireworks show in Chicago, which the city promised would be its largest ever. San Francisco, meanwhile, canceled its own widely attended yearly New Year’s show Tuesday, with Mayor London Breed (D) telling residents that “we must remain vigilant in doing all we can to stop the spread of the covid-19 omicron variant.”</p> <p>Anthony S. Fauci, the nation’s top infectious-disease expert, said Monday that a small gathering with vaccinated family members would be the safest way to celebrate. And be wary of larger events, he advised.</p> <p>“When you’re talking about a New Year’s Eve party where you have 30, 40, 50 people celebrating, you do not know the status of their vaccination, I would recommend strongly: Stay away from that this year,” Fauci said in an interview with CNN. “There will be other years to do that, but not this year.”</p> <p>In New York City, home to the country’s largest and most storied New Year’s bash, Mayor Bill de Blasio (D) made an ebullient announcement last month inviting the masses back to Times Square for the resumption of the raucous annual celebration.</p> <p>“Everyone come on down,” he said Nov. 16. “We can finally get back together again. It’s going to be amazing.”</p> <p>But last week — on the same day New York reported its highest number of new virus cases ever — de Blasio said the city would scale back its New Year’s event. Attendees must be fully vaccinated and</p>

wear masks. A total of 15,000 people will be permitted in designated viewing areas, about a quarter of the usual capacity, to allow for more social distancing.

The changes are meant to “keep the fully vaccinated crowd safe and healthy as we ring in the New Year,” de Blasio said in a statement.

Other cities have canceled events entirely or are encouraging residents to stream the festivities online. Atlanta, for instance, [called off the Peach Drop](#), a 30-year-old celebration that draws tens of thousands to the Georgia capital to watch the midnight descent of a giant fake peach.

Seattle will still launch fireworks from the Space Needle, but the display [will include](#) special effects that can only be seen online or on television, a twist meant to promote “streaming in the New Year,” organizers said.

And in Annapolis, leaders [canceled](#) in-person events but said they would still launch fireworks over the city’s harbor.

“We want people to celebrate, but to do so safely and in a way that doesn’t further tax hospitals and public safety personnel,” Mayor Gavin Buckley (D) said Monday.

Elsewhere — notably, [Las Vegas](#) — plans remain unchanged. An eight-minute fireworks display along the Strip will cap the citywide party.

Internationally, events in Paris, London, Berlin and elsewhere have been canceled. World Health Organization Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus pleaded with officials and individuals earlier this month to approach the holidays safely, even if that meant calling off or postponing a get-together.

“An event canceled is better than a life canceled,” Tedros [told reporters](#). “It’s better to cancel now and celebrate later, than to celebrate now and grieve later.”

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HEADLINE	12/28 Flight disruptions: weather, staff shortages
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/transportation/2021/12/28/airlines-flights-omicron-cancellations/
GIST	<p>Flight disruptions triggered by weather and coronavirus-related staffing shortages eased slightly Tuesday, but they still amounted to more than 1,100 cancellations, stranding holiday travelers across the country as many try to return home.</p> <p>The cancellations were down from Sunday and Monday, when more than 1,400 flights — including domestic trips and flights in and out of the United States — were scrubbed each day, according to FlightAware.</p> <p>Across the country, airlines are trying to reschedule hundreds of delayed and canceled trips for passengers scrambling to get home after the holidays. The fast-spreading omicron variant of the coronavirus began to overwhelm airlines just before Christmas, teaming up with pockets of wintry weather to disrupt flight schedules as millions of Americans traveled to visit family.</p> <p>As the disruptions have dragged on, passengers have complained of multiple cancellations and difficulties in reaching customer service agents. When Sun Country Airlines tweeted a message to thank passengers for their patience, Ryan Boser unleashed keystrokes of fury over the frustrated hours he spent trying to reschedule a flight.</p> <p>Boser, his fiancée, two young daughters and infant son experienced a cancellation, an additional layover during a rescheduled Delta flight and multiple delays during their Friday trip into Minneapolis-St. Paul from Seattle to visit Boser’s father.</p>

The family members checked that their return journey home on Sun Country was on track Tuesday before Boser's father drove them to the airport. When they tried to check in, they learned the flight had been canceled.

"I just drove an hour through the snow with three young kids for a canceled flight," he tweeted.

More than 2 million people flew Monday, according to the Transportation Security Administration — a robust figure in the pandemic era and a continuing sign that the coronavirus is not deterring people from boarding planes.

The cancellations come as the travel industry attempts to recover from a pandemic that has choked off air travel, forcing airlines to rely on tens of billions of dollars in federal aid. With passenger counts over the Thanksgiving holiday approaching 90 percent of 2019 levels, airlines were optimistic about a continuing December rebound, only to be caught flat-footed by the virus's latest variant.

Some possible relief came Monday as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shortened the recommended isolation period for employees from 10 days to five, helping crew members resume work more quickly. Airlines had lobbied for the change last week.

Delta Air Lines, which led the industry's push for the change, said it was working to implement the new guidance and that it should provide more flexibility to schedule crews.

"This is a safe, science-based and more practical approach based on what we now know about the omicron variant," said Henry Ting, the airline's chief health officer.

Nonetheless, the airline said it expected to cancel 250 of its 4,133 scheduled flights Tuesday.

Southwest Airlines, which said it canceled about 80 flights Tuesday because of bad weather, said it's working with medical experts to fully understand the CDC's new standards.

Unions expressed concern about changing the standards, which apply to people who are asymptomatic. Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants, said she worried the CDC had set a guideline that was closely aligned with the requests of business leaders.

"If any business pressures a worker to return to work before they feel better we will make clear it is an unsafe work environment, which will cause a much greater disruption than any 'staffing shortages,' " Nelson said in a statement.

It's not clear how much of a difference the policy change will make, because airlines have not disclosed details about caseloads among employees. Some airlines, as well as TSA and the Federal Aviation Administration, say that, although they have seen a surge in cases, their operations have not been affected.

United Airlines reported 93 canceled flights Tuesday — 22 fewer than Monday — out of 4,000 scheduled flights. The cancellations were related to staffing issues caused by the omicron variant, the company said.

"We're sorry for the disruption and are working hard to rebook as many people as possible and get them on their way during the holidays," the airline said in a statement.

Several airlines continued to struggle, according to FlightAware. But as was the case Monday, Alaska Airlines and regional carrier SkyWest Airlines were hit hard, while Seattle-Tacoma International Airport saw a third day of heavy cancellations after Sunday snowfall.

Kate Hudson, a spokeswoman for the airport, said airlines were still feeling "ripple effects" from the bad weather. The FAA has periodically halted flights to manage the volume of traffic, she said.

“The airlines are working super hard to get passengers rebooked and reunited with their luggage,” Hudson said. “We know it’s been super exasperating for travelers.”

Animator Andy Wilson, 54, was supposed to fly Tuesday from Atlanta to the San Francisco Bay area via Seattle. He said he learned that his Alaska Airlines flight was canceled Monday and that he had been trying in vain to reach the airline by phone.

“It’s just crazy to me I can’t get through on a phone call,” Wilson said.

He had flown to Atlanta to see his dying father, but he said he’s eager to get home to his wife and their 2-month-old baby.

Later Tuesday, Wilson said Alaska had found him a direct flight to San Francisco on Delta for Wednesday morning.

For Boser, the first flight he was able to rebook was for 6 a.m. Friday — a three-day delay that he said will mean more days away from work.

“I’m just hoping we get out Friday at this point,” he said.

Vicki Tsang; her husband, Evan; her son, Sam, 13; and her elderly poodle, Sausage, tried unsuccessfully to leave Seattle, waking up at 3 a.m. Tuesday to catch a flight back to Burbank, Calif.

The family had visited relatives for the first time since the pandemic. Fearful of the omicron variant, Tsang had booked business-class tickets to give the family more distance from other passengers.

They arrived at the Seattle airport and checked the Alaska Airlines app. Their flight was canceled.

“We got no notification, no text, no emails, and we have yet to have any contact from Alaska Airlines on it,” Tsang said.

A line wrapped around as people tried to get answers from Alaska representatives. The packed conditions during a pandemic led Tsang and her family to go back to their hotel and try to get through to someone over the phone or online.

Phone calls were disconnected or put on hold. The app directed them to an online portal that crashed. It was a black hole of communication, Tsang said.

Constance von Muehlen, chief operating officer and executive vice president of Alaska, said in a statement that the airline is “working hard to reposition aircraft and crews back to the West Coast to get everyone where they need to be as quickly and safely as possible.”

As room service came to the room they were supposed to have checked out of, Tsang said she realized that they probably would not make it onto a Tuesday flight. They investigated other options, such as driving 1,200 miles back home.

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HEADLINE	12/28 Covid on cruise ships; keep on sailing
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2021/12/28/covid-spreading-cruises-no-shutdown/
GIST	The cruise industry thought it had adapted to covid-19. After emerging from a 15-month shutdown with a slew of new regulations approved by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, ships got back on the water in late June. Carnival Corp. CEO Arnold Donald said in a December earnings call that the company had established “effective” protocols for the 65,000 workers and 50 ships back in operation.

Now, though, the [omicron variant](#) of the [coronavirus](#) has changed the climate. Through Tuesday, 86 cruise ships carrying passengers in U.S. waters were reporting coronavirus cases onboard, the most since the comeback, according to CDC tracking data.

Over the past week of holiday travel, [stories of outbreaks](#), customers isolating in their cabins and ports turning away ships evoked conditions that brought cruising to a halt in March 2020, albeit without the severe cases or deaths that [marked the first wave of the pandemic](#). Cruise lines have imposed stricter measures since the omicron variant's discovery, and no industry-wide pause appears to be in sight.

When reached by The Washington Post this week, the CDC said it plans to allow its [Conditional Sailing Order](#) to expire as planned on Jan. 15. At that point, the restrictions imposed for pandemic-era cruising [will become recommendations](#).

"CDC acknowledges that it is not possible for cruising to be a zero-risk activity," the agency said in a statement this week. "The chance of getting covid-19 on cruise ships is high because the virus spreads easily between people in close quarters aboard ships."

In light of the most recent outbreaks, at least one lawmaker is calling for a second shutdown on cruises. "Time for CDC & cruise lines to protect consumers & again pause — docking their ships," U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) [tweeted](#) Tuesday. "Cruises are repeating recent history as petri dishes of COVID infection."

The steep rise in passenger ships with cases onboard — up from 73 on Monday — is a result of a couple of factors: Cruise lines are returning more ships to service, and the omicron variant is tearing through the population on land. According to Washington Post data, new daily coronavirus cases in the United States rose by 59 percent in the past week compared with the week before.

Cruise companies restarted U.S. trips in the summer with strict protocols they said should give passengers peace of mind. Those measures evolved — especially after the emergence of the delta variant in late summer — to include coronavirus vaccine requirements for most or all passengers, pre-cruise testing and masking in some crowded indoor areas, even for the vaccinated.

Omicron is forcing them to adapt as the highly transmissible variant causes the largest outbreaks the industry has seen in the United States since last year. But unlike 2020, when cruising shut down worldwide, the industry is not in a tailspin. Most of the recent infections detected onboard have been mildly symptomatic or asymptomatic, according to operators and the CDC.

"I think they're in better shape than spring 2020," said Andrew Coggins, a professor at Pace University who teaches cruise industry management. "Much more is known about covid and we have testing, vaccines and protocols."

Cruise lines say they are reacting to the omicron variant with additional requirements, namely mask rules indoors for everyone unless they are eating, drinking or in their own staterooms.

MSC Cruises said Tuesday that it will add — and pay for — an additional antigen test for all new passengers, either as they are boarding or once they're onboard.

"The new testing measure is part of our comprehensive protocol, which is designed to adapt its measures in line with the evolution of the pandemic ashore," the company said, adding that this includes the current surge and omicron's rise as the dominant variant in the United States.

Some lines, including Carnival, are prohibiting smoking in casinos in the near term. And while many are encouraging passengers to get a coronavirus booster shot, they are not mandating it. The world's biggest cruise lines, Carnival and Royal Caribbean, said crew members are getting boosters once eligible.

Bari Golin-Blaugrund, spokeswoman for Cruise Lines International Association, said in an email that the industry's measures include a focus on providing medical care, contact tracing, isolating potential cases and other efforts to keep cases from spreading.

In response to Blumenthal's tweet Tuesday, Golin-Blaugrund said that cases on ships in recent weeks made up just a small percentage of the populations onboard and that no setting is immune from the virus.

The CDC is investigating dozens of cases on cruise ships and advising cruise lines to require masks indoors and outside in crowded areas.

The "Seven Seas Mariner" traveling from Florida passes through the Panama Canal after it was barred from docking by local authorities in Colombia on Dec. 23. (Erick Marciscano/Reuters)
55 test positive for covid-19 on Royal Caribbean cruise, days after outbreak on another ship

Infectious-disease experts say the rules that cruise lines have in place are very good — but not perfect.

An infected passenger might not have enough virus to show up in a pre-cruise test but could become symptomatic during a trip, said William Schaffner, professor of preventive medicine and infectious diseases at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine in Nashville.

"With a virus that's so contagious as omicron, it can wriggle its way through some of these barriers that we put up," he said. "And in a rather contained population where people have intensive face-to-face contact all the time, that's an ideal environment for a virus like this to spread."

Gigi Gronvall, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, said testing for more than one day in a row would be wise before passengers board. She said she was glad to see at least some cruise lines, including Disney, requiring children as young as 5 to be vaccinated.

Thomas Russo, professor and chief of the division of infectious diseases at the University at Buffalo, had a Baltic cruise planned for this August and September that he postponed a year due to ports closing and logistics concerns.

He said that although he enjoys cruises, now is not the time for anyone who is immunocompromised or at high risk of severe disease — advice the CDC also gives.

"I think it's a hard pass on cruises right now" for that population, he said. "Just be patient, wait until this current wave passes."

Jessica Justman, an infectious-diseases specialist and epidemiologist at Columbia University, has a family member on a Caribbean cruise now.

"We talked about how breakfast and lunch were meals that could be eaten outdoors on the deck," she said. "So the only time where you have to eat indoors is at dinner." She suggested eating that meal quickly and then putting a mask right back on.

Justman said if she were considering a cruise, she would want one that mandated vaccination and boosters for everyone, as well as testing twice a week.

So far, cruise companies and observers say they are seeing some short-term cancellations in light of the omicron surge, but solid longer-term demand has persisted.

Colleen McDaniel, editor in chief of Cruise Critic, said members of her site's active online community are "reevaluating" what they want to do.

"What we're seeing right now is pretty substantial discussion about it," she said. Some plan to still go, others are planning to reschedule until the summer.

McDaniel said most have concerns: “Am I going to have fun on a cruise? Am I going to be okay if I have to wear masks in public? Am I going to be able to return easily to the United States? Am I going to get turned away from the port I want to visit?”

Ilana Schattauer, a cruise travel blogger from Montreal who runs the website and YouTube channel Life Well Cruised, posted a video Sunday about her own upcoming cruise. She leaves Fort Lauderdale, Fla., on Wednesday on Regal Princess for an eight-day Caribbean cruise with her husband and 21-year-old son.

“Our biggest concerns are being stuck on the ship or testing positive, even if we are asymptomatic or have mild symptoms,” she said in an email. “We realize that this new variant is so contagious, and even being fully vaccinated we still have a risk of being exposed. We also need to head back to Canada after the cruise, which is another complication.”

Still, Schattauer said she didn’t want to cancel. She feels comfortable with the cruise line’s mask policy and other safety measures.

“Hopefully with the stricter protocols and mask rules, we’ll see less cases than we’ve seen on a few cruise ships that have recently been in the spotlight,” she said.

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HEADLINE	12/28 Mexico detains more US-bound migrants
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/qjbjdd/mexico-detained-more-migrants-than-ever-before
GIST	<p>MEXICO CITY—Mexico detained more migrants, most of them headed to the U.S., than ever before from January to November of 2021, according to government statistics.</p> <p>Authorities in Mexico detained more than a quarter of a million migrants during that period—252,526—the vast majority in Mexico’s southern border state of Chiapas, which borders Guatemala and is where most migrants traveling from Central America enter Mexico on their way north to the U.S.</p> <p>The new figures suggest that the government of Mexico President Andrés Manuel López Obrador is working harder than ever to serve the interests of the U.S., which has been piling pressure on Mexico to deport migrants passing through on their way to the United States for decades.</p> <p>The number of detentions is a massive increase from 2020, when migration dropped dramatically due to the COVID-19 pandemic and only 82,000 migrants were detained, according to media reports. The previous high was 2005, when over 240,000 migrants were detained in Mexico.</p> <p>Former U.S. President Barack Obama began putting significant political pressure on Mexico to stop migrants from Central America from getting to the countries' shared borders following a surge of unaccompanied child migrants in 2014. Back then, Mexico launched its Southern Border Plan under pressure from the U.S., and began detaining thousands of migrants.</p> <p>Pressure to detain migrants on their way through Mexico increased under the administration of Donald Trump and continues under that of Joe Biden.</p> <p>Nearly 110,000 of the migrants detained by Mexican officials this year came from Honduras, followed most closely by Guatemala with over 70,000. An additional roughly 18,000 were Haitian. Other continents saw much lower numbers. African migrants accounted for only 1,851 of the amount detained, while Asian migrants only numbered 1,327—with roughly half coming from Bangladesh.</p> <p>Migrants fleeing corrupt, fragile and violence-ravaged states in Central America and other nations run many risks passing through Mexico: They can fall prey to criminal groups and corrupt law enforcement officials—kidnappings and disappearances of migrants is common. In January, 19 migrants died near the U.S. border after being shot at and having their truck set on fire. 12 police officers, some of them trained by the U.S., were charged for their murders.</p>

	<p>Rudimentary and unsafe transport methods used by migrant groups and the smugglers they pay to help them get to the border with the United States are also hazardous. More than 50 migrants were killed this month in the southern state of Chiapas when a trailer-truck carrying more than 150 people crashed.</p> <p>But neither those dangers, nor measures taken by the U.S. government, are deterring migrants from making the treacherous journey from their home country in search of “the American Dream.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 DOH: record number daily infections
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/state/washington/article256899087.html
GIST	<p>The Washington Department of Health has reported a new record number of cases tallied in a single day.</p> <p>State officials confirmed 6,235 new cases on Dec. 24, The Seattle Times reported. The state’s previous single-day record number of cases was 5,526 cases on Dec. 7, 2020. Dec. 24 also marked the first time Washington state reported over 6,000 cases in a single day.</p> <p>The spike in cases mirrors that of other U.S. cities as the super-infectious omicron variant has become dominant and pushed daily counts past the peak of the delta variant wave.</p> <p>State health officials also confirmed 3,847 new cases and 17 deaths on Monday, bringing the state’s totals to 834,235 cases and 9,801 deaths.</p> <p>In King County as of Tuesday, the average count of daily cases increased to 1,987 infections per day. The new rate reflects a 213% increase in the past seven days. COVID-related hospitalizations have increased 58% in the last week, Public Health – Seattle & King County said on Monday.</p> <p>While more fully vaccinated people are testing positive, King County public health officials say unvaccinated people still have the highest risk of contracting and transmitting the virus.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Seattle Public Schools to ‘reopen on time’
SOURCE	https://www.seattlepi.com/coronavirus/article/seattle-public-schools-to-return-to-class-in-jan-16732857.php
GIST	<p>Despite an expected spike in new coronavirus cases following the holidays, Western Washington’s largest school districts say classes — for now — will start on time and in person.</p> <p>“Our plan is to reopen schools as scheduled on Monday, January 3,” Seattle Public Schools said in a message sent to families. “That said, we are also preparing for the possibility that some classrooms, and perhaps some schools, will have to go remote at some point in January.”</p> <p>Speculation that schools will see a spike in new cases is fueled by concern over the omicron variant of the coronavirus, which health experts say is "extraordinarily contagious." Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation’s top infectious disease expert, said on Sunday that omicron is even more contagious than the delta variant, which is considered to be twice as transmissible as earlier strains.</p> <p>With students set to return to classrooms following holiday gatherings over winter break, some state universities — including the University of Washington and Western Washington University — have already announced that the first week of classes on their campuses will be held remotely.</p> <p>“This will allow time for post-travel COVID testing, symptom monitoring and additional time for students to get booster shots,” Western Washington University said in an Instagram post announcing the decision.</p> <p>Seattle Public Schools spokesperson Tina Christiansen told the SeattlePI that district officials will continue monitoring public health data and will update parents if their current thinking changes.</p>

	<p>Officials with the Lake Washington School District and Tacoma Public Schools also said classes will start on time and in person on Jan. 3. They said their respective districts will also continue to monitor public health data and will communicate any changes to parents.</p> <p>Washington's current COVID data reflects the assumption that omicron, while highly contagious, is less severe than previous strains. New cases are up 54% over the last two weeks, but hospitalizations and deaths are down 3% and 7%, respectively. The state is currently averaging 2,083 new cases per day.</p> <p>Seattle Public Schools, the state's largest school district, has done well in its handling of the virus. Since classes began in August, the district has seen a total of 1,049 student cases. That represents just over 2% of students in the district.</p> <p>To avoid the potential switch to remote learning next month, the district recommends families get their children vaccinated and boosted if eligible. It's also encouraging families to avoid large gatherings, and to wear masks and practice social distancing while in public.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Covid death rates rising in some groups
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/12/28/us/covid-deaths.html
GIST	<p>The overall rate of Covid-19 deaths has declined since vaccines became widely available in April, yet nearly a quarter million people in the United States have died from the virus in the past eight months. The virus is now responsible for a higher share of deaths from all causes for younger Americans and white Americans than it was before all adults were eligible for vaccines.</p> <p>Covid accounted for 14 percent of all deaths in the United States from March 2020 until all adults became eligible for the vaccine in April, compared with 11 percent of deaths since then.</p> <p>And while for much of the pandemic, older Americans and people of color were more likely to die from the virus, the demographics of those dying from Covid have shifted too, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>How the arrival of the highly transmissible Omicron variant will affect these trends remains to be seen, since the current data on deaths is reliable only through late November. Scientists are still hopeful that vaccines — and especially booster shots — will stave off Omicron's worst effects.</p> <p>Covid-19 has been particularly deadly for older people, but that group was also among the first to be eligible for vaccines. Now, people 65 and older have the highest vaccination rate, with nearly 90 percent of them fully vaccinated.</p> <p>The higher vaccination rate for older people has helped to protect them. Although more older than younger people still die from Covid-19, the virus is now responsible for a smaller share of all deaths among people 65 and older than it was before vaccines became available to all adults. For those younger than 65, Covid-19 has risen as a cause of death.</p> <p>The change in death rates among groups is starker by race and ethnicity, and the death rate has risen particularly sharply for middle-aged white people. Covid-19 now accounts for a much larger share of all deaths for that group than it did before vaccines were widely available.</p> <p>Some of the shift could be attributed to the lagging vaccination rates among white people overall. White people were vaccinated at a higher rate than Black and Hispanic people in the early months of the vaccination campaign — in part because people of color faced more obstacles to vaccine access.</p> <p>In recent months, however, data from the C.D.C. shows that the vaccination gap has narrowed. White people are now less likely than Asians and Hispanics to be vaccinated, though somewhat more likely than Black people, and their death rates have risen in all but the oldest age groups.</p>

Younger people from all groups likewise have been vaccinated at lower rates, and children 5 and up have been eligible for vaccines only since early November.

Where people are dying of Covid-19 also has changed since vaccines became widely available. Death rates fell in most counties across the country, and in about one in five counties, the death rate fell by more than half. But in about one in 10 counties, death rates have more than doubled.

In the early months of the pandemic, deaths were highest in the Northeast, including in New York City and in other urban areas. Now they are spread across the country. Many places that were spared in the first year of the pandemic have not been able to maintain their low death rates.

Places like Mississippi and Alabama saw death rates fall, but their rates remain higher overall than in places like Vermont and Maine, which saw rates increase but remain low.

States with lower vaccination rates tend to have had higher Covid-19 death rates, particularly from the most recent wave of Delta variant infections, which hit the South the hardest.

This all suggests that the change in who is dying from Covid-19 may be tied to which areas experienced the worst outbreaks of the Delta variant and who in those areas remains unvaccinated. Relaxed precautions in many areas may also play a role.

When vaccination rates and behavior changes are not enough to stop the virus from spreading, those infections are much more likely to lead to hospitalization and death for unvaccinated people. The [latest data](#) from the C.D.C., which is based on data from 25 states and cities, shows that the death rate for unvaccinated people is 14 times as high as that for vaccinated people.

And Omicron is now [causing a surge in coronavirus cases](#), even in highly vaccinated places. Although preliminary studies abroad suggest that infections from the variant [could be milder](#), scientists caution that it is too soon to tell how deadly it will be, or for whom.

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HEADLINE	12/28 HS grads skip college, fill worker shortage
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/28/pandemic-draws-high-school-grads-skip-college-fill/
GIST	<p>High school graduates increasingly are opting to fill worker vacancies as an alternative to college amid the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a school-to-career vocational training program.</p> <p>Jobs for America's Graduates provides vocational training to 75,000 middle and high school students in 40 states and two U.S. territories. It reports that a record 82% of its graduating students went directly into full-time employment at the end of the 2020-21 academic year — an unprecedented percentage, compared to the previous high of 76%.</p> <p>“The biggest change is that our young people are getting far more full-time jobs and with benefits, the most in our history,” said Ken Smith, president of the Alexandria, Virginia-based nonprofit. “Also, more front-line health care jobs than usual is a second important change.”</p> <p>Demand for high school graduates has soared especially in the hospitality, retail, medical and transportation industries, according to Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG).</p> <p>“Many of the retail and hospitality jobs were hit hardest during the pandemic; these are also the industries where many of our young people get their first jobs while in JAG,” said Niki Childers, the vocational program's director of partnerships.</p> <p>“Since the pandemic, those same industries, along with others, are struggling to rebound from the effects and are now offering hiring bonuses, increased hourly wages and competitive benefits packages that are very attractive to a young person just graduating high school,” she added.</p>

The Jobs for America's Graduates program also reported record highs in its graduation rate (96.8%) and in the full-time placement rate of students in jobs, college or the military (92%) last year.

JAG's results come amid employer frustration over persistent worker shortages in various industries amid the coronavirus. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported this month that, as of Oct. 31, job openings had increased to 11 million while the number of hires remained at 6.5 million. The unemployment rate is 4.2%.

In addition, the nation's labor force lost 3.8 million workers aged 45 to 64 between 2010 and 2020 and will lose 1.5 million workers aged 16 to 24 between 2020 and 2030, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Meanwhile, college enrollment this fall was down for the second year in a row, and a record 4.4 million Americans quit their jobs in September, suggesting that employer demand for high school graduates could rise next spring.

The value of some college degrees has been eroded by a variety of factors including long-term debt, vaccine mandates, generous unemployment benefits and difficulty in obtaining child care, said Hans Dau, CEO of Mitchell Madison Group business consulting firm.

"The fact that companies are hiring more high school graduates is just the free market expressing how much it values certain college degrees: apparently not very much," said Mr. Dau, a supply chain analyst.

Financial analysts said high school seniors who have vocational training or are willing to receive it on the job would be wise to enter the workforce right after graduation this spring.

"You'll get a job where you can learn and make money, and avoid years of debt and four years of toil getting most college degrees," said Charles Mizrahi, a Wall Street trader.

Christine McDaniel, a senior fellow at George Mason University's Mercatus Center free-market think tank, said that "a system of universal higher education is not necessarily optimal" in an economy that lacks qualified craft workers to meet the growing demand for new home construction.

"Labor supply is not keeping up with demand," said Ms. McDaniel, a former assistant deputy secretary of the Treasury. "So the fact that we are seeing employers offer more attractive hiring packages and vocational training reflects the supply and demand in the labor market."

However, Brian Marks, who teaches economics at the University of New Haven, said it's too early to tell whether the rising demand for high school graduates will last.

"We may also be witnessing a period in which those attending college are seeking part-time, paid, employment experiences," he said. "This could be nothing more than a short-term fix to the current labor imbalance."

He predicted that wages will remain higher on balance for employees with advanced degrees, even as high school graduates reevaluate college and businesses reexamine career training and education requirements in their employment packages.

"We may have a generation of workers who may be more 'asset-specific' to a certain type of job or employer, given the nature of the training," Mr. Marks said. "While certain aspects of the economy have been transformed by the COVID-19 public health crisis or accelerated as a result of the crisis because of certain pre-existing economic conditions, the relationship between education and income will not likely disappear in the long run."

HEADLINE	12/29 Eastern Europe authoritarian measures
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/29/eastern-european-countries-adopt-authoritarian-measures-covid
GIST	<p>Europe's political approach to the coronavirus pandemic has divided down stark east-west lines, a Guardian analysis has found.</p> <p>Five of 18 eastern European countries have registered major violations of international democratic freedoms since March 2020, according to research conducted by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, compared with none of 12 western European countries.</p> <p>The research also shows that eastern European countries have been more likely to turn to abusive enforcement, disinformation and discriminatory measures, with the most common violation being restrictions on the media.</p> <p>The worst violations were observed in Serbia, which recorded a violations score three times higher than the European average. Under a special regime implemented in a declared state of emergency, refugees, migrants and asylum seekers were selectively targeted and put under strict 24-hour quarantine, controlled by the military. They were banned from leaving the centres, while support staff were prevented from entering.</p> <p>Belgium was the only western European country where moderate misconduct occurred. The country recorded ethnic profiling during the pandemic, according to the V-Dem Institute, with abusive police practices disproportionately affecting minority ethnic communities.</p> <p>The death of a 19-year-old man of north African descent during a police chase prompted anti-racism protests, with people demanding justice and accountability. Later, the UN committee on the elimination of racial discrimination (Cerd) issued a report expressing concerns about the discriminatory police-related acts.</p> <p>Experts say such actions often follow Covid-19 measures set by the government and do not have a clear basis in the rule of law.</p> <p>Dr Joelle Grogan, a senior lecturer in law at Middlesex University, found that experts from 24 out of 27 EU countries reported at least some concern regarding restrictive measures falling outside the legal powers of the government.</p> <p>However, even if “nearly all countries struggle with balancing the rule of law with the intense pressure to act in an emergency”, she said this did not mean we should be equally concerned about all countries.</p> <p>The Guardian analysis also revealed how some east-central European governments with a history of undermining democratic principles have exploited the pandemic to further spread anti-democratic practices.</p> <p>In Slovenia, the government placed financial and legal restrictions on NGOs and changed environmental legislation under one of its coronavirus stimulus packages. As of 23 June 2021, the country was added to a watchlist of countries experiencing a rapid decline in civil liberties.</p> <p>“Since the government came to power, it has used Covid-19 as a pretext to try to pass measures which affect basic human rights,” said Civicus, the global civil society alliance.</p> <p>The Polish parliament recently passed a media bill that disfranchises TVN, Poland's main private network, continuing the government's push to control the media. The level of risk to Poland's democratic liberties is more than three times that of the European average.</p> <p>According to Grogan, there was deep concern for the “rule of law crisis with many EU states systematically undermining and dismantling democratic institutions”.</p>

Alongside Hungary and Poland, substantial democratic declines were observed in Serbia, Turkey and [Slovenia](#) since 2010.

While democratic regimes remained rather stable in most of western Europe, four eastern European countries shifted down from liberal to electoral democracies, according to the V-Dem Institute. Two others – Hungary and [Serbia](#) – shifted down from electoral democracy to electoral autocracy.

For Grogan, the risk lies in democratic infringements in the name of emergency response becoming normalised. “The risk of normalising emergency is that ordinary expectations of what rights we can exercise without conditions are forgotten, and what decisions government should only make with permission are ignored: we can say we have a democracy, but not live in one.”

There is hope, however, since she argues authoritarianism fundamentally relies on public support. “For ordinary people – protest, objection and education [are] the best resistance against anti-democratic trends.”

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HEADLINE	12/28 States hold off strict Covid measures
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/as-omicron-variant-spreads-states-aim-for-balance-between-curbs-and-safety-11640714214?mod=hp_lead_pos6
GIST	<p>As states grapple with how to rein in the spread of the Omicron variant, many governors and other state officials are applying a lighter touch than during previous surges, as they are armed with more tools to combat the virus and increasingly mindful of the economic harm caused by sweeping restrictions.</p> <p>Many decision makers say they are trying to avoid strict measures enacted during previous Covid surges by encouraging vaccinations, increasing capacity for rapid testing and closely watching factors such as hospital admissions and booster-shot uptake.</p> <p>“I’m trying to build long-term solutions,” New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu, a Republican, said in an interview Tuesday, adding that he expects the pandemic may be a part of life for a while. “So the answer there is not to turn things on and off as things surge or don’t surge. We have the tools to manage this.”</p> <p>Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine said in an interview Monday that he is focused primarily on hospitalizations as opposed to how many people were testing positive for Covid-19, a key metric earlier on.</p> <p>More than 5,000 people were hospitalized with Covid-19 in Ohio on Monday, the highest since last winter’s surge, but the difference now is that authorities have a handle on what and who is driving the high inpatient count, with more than 90% of the patients unvaccinated, said Mr. DeWine, a Republican.</p> <p>“We’re seeing the power of the vaccine to keep people out of the hospital,” said Mr. DeWine, who has said he looks each day at the number of people getting vaccine shots in Ohio and has been encouraged.</p> <p>He has also said he is focused on keeping hospitals staffed and has mobilized more than 1,000 members of the National Guard to help strapped health centers deal with the rising number of Covid-19 patients.</p> <p>In New Hampshire, Gov. Sununu said he believes data around case counts will become inaccurate because many people won’t report their at-home test results to the government. “The key metric is going to be your hospitalization rate,” he said. “There is no gray area there.” In New Hampshire, which also activated the National Guard to assist at health-care facilities, hospitalizations have been stabilizing after the state was among the first to experience a winter surge, he said.</p> <p>Many public leaders said they welcomed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance on Monday to cut the recommended isolation time for people infected with Covid-19 to five days from 10, reflecting recent research as well as strain on some industries from Omicron-related absences.</p>

“With these updated recommendations, more Maine people will now be able to return to their lives safely and more quickly,” said Gov. Janet Mills, a Democrat, in a statement Monday. “That can help us keep our economic recovery moving forward, keep our children in schools, and be with our loved ones during this important time of year.”

Colorado said it plans to follow the new CDC guidelines, and the California Department of Health said it would also adopt the updated guidelines “to keep our economy moving and schools open.” New Hampshire plans to follow the new CDC guidelines, while also keeping its own protocols in some cases, Mr. Sununu said.

Michigan is also considering changes. A spokesman for the state’s health department said officials would announce updates soon.

States reported 512,553 cases on Monday—the most for a single day since the start of the pandemic—as reports caught up after a holiday pause, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis of data from Johns Hopkins University. The tally lifted the seven-day average of reported cases to 237,061, just 15,000 less than the pandemic high recorded about a year ago.

A growing body of evidence suggests Omicron [causes less severe illness](#) in those with high levels of immunity, either through vaccines or past infections, although research is ongoing.

Some public officials caution that there are still uncertainties around the dangers of the Omicron variant given that hospitalizations and deaths tend to lag infections, and that a small percentage of serious cases among a huge number of infections could still overwhelm hospitals.

“We don’t really have definitive information here and I think that’s a concern,” said Dr. Bisola Ojikutu, the executive director of the Boston Public Health Commission. She said she is closely following the percentage of local tests that come back positive, as well as hospitalization rates and Covid-related emergency-room visits.

Tracking Omicron’s spread was complicated by holiday closures, including in South Carolina, where state-run health departments were closed Monday and Tuesday.

In a call with governors Monday, President Biden said the federal government is boosting testing and vaccine sites, stockpiling medical equipment and has already mobilized emergency response teams to Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, Vermont, New Hampshire and New Mexico.

Yet he said it would fall to state leaders to devise and deploy strategies to fight the Omicron surge. “Look, there is no federal solution,” he said. “This gets solved at a state level.”

New York’s Democratic Gov. Kathy Hochul last week [relaxed isolation guidelines](#) for fully vaccinated critical workforce participants who have had breakthrough infections with no or very mild symptoms.

At a public briefing Monday, she said it is “not March of 2020, we have tools at our disposal and the question is how we’re deploying them.”

New York has seen record numbers of infections in recent days, but Covid-19 hospitalizations of 5,526 on Sunday were about 30% less than the same time a year ago, Ms. Hochul said.

Still, Ms. Hochul cautioned that hospital stays are rising, and her administration on Monday again highlighted [rising pediatric Covid-19 hospitalizations](#), particularly in New York City and among the unvaccinated. There were 184 pediatric Covid-19 admissions statewide in the partial week of Dec. 19 to Dec. 23, versus 70 in the full week ending Dec. 11; in New York City, the admissions jumped to 109 from 22 in that same time frame.

	<p>New York is delivering six million Covid-19 tests to schools this week and the governor has said she would like to see a requirement that school children be vaccinated against the virus.</p> <p>Ms. Hochul has required healthcare workers to be vaccinated against the virus since late September, but she said Monday that her administration decided against a mandate for public transit workers after calculating that 80% were already vaccinated, close contact with passengers was limited, and that a mandate would exacerbate workforce shortages.</p> <p>“These are not black and white questions, always,” Ms. Hochul said. “We cannot do anything that’s going to create a dynamic where there are no trains picking people up for their jobs in the morning, or getting healthcare workers to their jobs in hospitals.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Daily record coronavirus cases broken
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/28/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#the-us-record-for-daily-coronavirus-cases-is-broken-as-omicron-and-delta-variants-disrupt-the-end-of-2021
GIST	<p>The U.S. record for daily coronavirus cases has been broken, as two highly contagious variants — Delta and Omicron — have converged to disrupt holiday travel and gatherings, deplete hospital staffs and plunge the United States into another long winter.</p> <p>As a third year of the pandemic loomed, the seven-day average of U.S. cases topped 267,000 on Tuesday, according to a New York Times database. The milestone was marked after a year that has whipsawed Americans from a relaxation of rules in the spring to a Delta-driven summer wave to another surge that accelerated with astonishing speed as Omicron emerged after Thanksgiving.</p> <p>The record came just a day after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reduced the number of days that infected Americans should remain isolated to five days, from 10. The C.D.C. changed course as Omicron’s rapid spread has worsened a labor shortage, upending the hospitality, medical and travel industries, among others. The agency did not recommend rapid testing before people left isolation and experts warned that omission risked seeding new cases and heaping even more pressure on already overburdened health systems.</p> <p>The previous U.S. daily cases record was set on Jan. 11, 2021, when the seven-day average was 251,232. That was during a catastrophic winter that was far worse than this moment, when over 62 percent of Americans are fully vaccinated. And early evidence, including some hopeful reports from South Africa, suggests Omicron causes milder symptoms than other variants, with vaccinations and boosters helping prevent serious illness and death.</p> <p>Hospitalizations have been rising, averaging more than 71,000 daily, but remain far below peak levels. While deaths have also been increasing, the daily average of 1,243 is a fraction of the record 3,342 reported on Jan. 26.</p> <p>Nevertheless, Omicron has a considerably easier time than Delta infecting vaccinated people. The onrushing cascade of patients threatens to overwhelm hospitals just as health care workers themselves are increasingly infected.</p> <p>A sizable number of patients remain infected with the deadlier Delta variant. On Tuesday, the C.D.C. reported that Omicron cases made up a significantly lower percentage of the overall U.S. caseload than was expected, at roughly 59 percent. And for the week ending Dec. 18, the agency revised down its estimate of 73 percent to about 23 percent, meaning Delta remained dominant until this week.</p> <p>Omicron is undoubtedly becoming the dominant variant and that could be good news: A new laboratory study carried out by South African scientists showed that people who have recovered from an infection with the variant may be able to fend off later infections from Delta.</p>

Records are also being broken in [Europe](#), but so far leaders of [Britain](#), [France](#), Spain and some other countries have resisted imposing harsh new restrictions, amid calls from some who argue that it is time to accept that the virus is endemic and that countries should move away from lockdowns. These nations, confronted with Covid fatigue, are betting for now that high vaccine and booster coverage, along with earlier restrictions still in place, will be enough to keep the coronavirus manageable.

The United States has also taken a similar path, as [President Biden](#) has repeatedly said that the era of lockdowns is over and promised to increase [testing](#), double down on [vaccination campaigns](#) and prop up hospitals. But [public health experts](#) have warned that the measures will not be sufficient to prevent soaring infections and hospitalizations over the next few weeks. And demand for tests has exploded while manufacturers are scrambling [to increase production and distribution](#).

Testing is central to [New York City's plan](#) to keep the largest U.S. school district open in the new year. The city announced Tuesday that it will eliminate its policy of quarantining entire classrooms exposed to the coronavirus, and will instead use a ramped-up testing program to allow students who test negative and do not have symptoms to remain in school.

Omicron is hitting the U.S. Mid-Atlantic region especially hard. [Washington, Maryland and Virginia](#) all broke records for daily case counts on Monday.

"D.C. is a marker for what we're likely to see in much of the rest of the country," [Neil J. Sehgal](#), an assistant professor of health policy at the University of Maryland's School of Public Health, said. "A tidal wave in Omicron cases is likely to flood much of the country in the next month."

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HEADLINE	12/28 D.C., Maryland, Virginia eclipse US records
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/28/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#washington-dc-maryland-and-virginia-break-records-for-highest-number-of-cases-eclipsing-the-rest-of-the-us
GIST	<p>Coronavirus positivity rates have surged in the Washington, D.C., region, urged on by the Omicron variant, which has steadily gained dominance in the U.S. throughout the holiday season.</p> <p>Washington, Maryland and Virginia all broke records on Monday in reporting their highest case counts of the pandemic. Washington reported almost 1,000 percent more new cases over the past two weeks and more than 9,000 new cases since Dec. 24. Maryland's seven-day average for daily new cases stands at more than double the previous high recorded almost a year ago, in January.</p> <p>"The road to get through the next three or four weeks is going to be very rough," said Earl Stoddard, the assistant chief administrative officer for Montgomery County, Md., which borders Washington. "There are going to be an absolute ton more cases. The hope is that we're not going to see those necessarily reflected in hospitalizations that will lead to severe complications and or death."</p> <p>Virginia reported more than 18,000 new cases over the Christmas weekend, with Fairfax and Arlington counties showing that positive cases have quadrupled over the past two weeks. None of the positive test counts reported in the region include at-home tests, meaning that the number of infected individuals is likely even higher.</p> <p>Neil J. Sehgal, a professor of health policy at the University of Maryland's School of Public Health, said that despite high vaccination rates in the region, the Omicron variant is likely tearing through the population, which includes a large number of adults between 20 and 49 who socialize and travel during the holiday season.</p> <p>"We're seeing a bit of a holiday party phenomenon, I think," Mr. Sehgal said. "People aged 20 to 49 are more transmission efficient — they're more likely to infect people once they have been infected themselves."</p>

	<p>Hospitalizations are ticking up, with more than 1,500 people having been hospitalized with Covid-19 in Maryland as of Dec. 23. While deaths have remained at about the same level over the past two weeks in most of the region, the number often lags behind the number of positive case rates by two to three weeks. And Maryland is juggling other issues, including a hack on Dec. 4 that has prevented the state from reporting county-level data on Covid-19 cases and shortages of emergency medical workers and hospital staff as they test positive.</p> <p>“We’ve got beds here, but we don’t have the nurses to staff those beds,” said Marc Elrich, Montgomery County’s executive. “You feel like the circle is closing in around you after a while.”</p> <p>The region is also struggling to keep up with demands for testing. In Northern Virginia, pharmacies that sell at-home Covid tests and libraries, which had been handing out free kits, have put up signs at their entrances telling people they have no more supply. Local news reported mass confusion among Maryland residents about testing locations and lines of hundreds of cars in the days after Christmas.</p> <p>The surge, which is expected to continue into the new year, has already upended a return to school for college students. The George Washington University canceled in-person classes in January and Howard University has pushed back the start of its spring semester. Mr. Stoddard said that public schools in Montgomery County were keen on ramping up testing in order to prevent further disruption to students.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 CDC lowers estimate omicron prevalence
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/28/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#the-cdc-significantly-lowers-its-estimate-of-omicrons-prevalence-nationwide
GIST	<p>The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that the Omicron variant now accounts for roughly 59 percent of all Covid cases in the United States, a significant decrease from the agency’s previous estimate. The update shows how hard it is to track the fast-spreading variant in real time and how poorly the agency has communicated its uncertainty, experts said.</p> <p>Last week, the C.D.C. said that Omicron accounted for approximately 73 percent of variants circulating in the United States in the week ending Dec. 18. But in its revision, the agency said the variant accounted for about 23 percent of cases that week.</p> <p>In other words, Delta, which has dominated U.S. infections since summer, still reigned in the United States that week. That could mean that a significant number of current Covid hospitalizations were driven by infections from Delta, Dr. Scott Gottlieb, a former commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, suggested on Twitter. Hospitalizations typically lag several weeks behind initial infections.</p> <p>Experts said they were not surprised by the revisions, given that the C.D.C.’s estimates are rough guesses, with a wide range of possible values known as “confidence intervals.” Cases of Omicron can only be confirmed by genetic sequencing, which is performed on just a portion of samples across the country.</p> <p>And Omicron is still spreading extremely fast.</p> <p>Still, they said the C.D.C. did a poor job communicating the uncertainty of its estimates. The agency has had a series of missteps during the pandemic, including sending out botched tests early on and shifting guidance on masking. On Monday, when it halved the recommended isolation period to five days for those who test positive but show no symptoms, critics objected that there was no requirement to test before returning to work.</p> <p>Dr. Jerome Adams, who served as the U.S. surgeon general under former President Donald J. Trump, wrote on Twitter on Tuesday that while he respected the C.D.C., he disagreed with its decision on isolation periods.</p>

He [also criticized](#) the new guidance's lack of a test-out option or recommendation for higher-quality masks.

David O'Connor, a virologist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, said of the Omicron estimate, "The 73 percent got a lot more attention than the confidence intervals, and I think this is one example among many where scientists are trying to project an air of confidence about what's going to happen."

Dr. O'Connor said he initially thought the initial estimate "seemed high." The agency came up with the estimate based on a "relatively small number of sequences," he added.

"It's like playing Name That Tune, and trying to say, based on just the first note, if the song is 'Ice Ice Baby' by Vanilla Ice, or 'Under Pressure,'" Dr. O'Connor said. "Without more data, it can be really hard to know which one it's going to be."

The new estimate of 59 percent is also a rough calculation, experts said, and will most likely be revised in future weeks.

"I just want people to be very aware that that is an estimate, that's not actually from sequence-confirmed cases," said Nathan Grubaugh, an epidemiologist at the Yale School of Public Health. "With Omicron in particular, it's been very difficult to have any sort of projections, because things are changing just so so rapidly."

Dr. Grubaugh, who is tracking probable Omicron samples in Connecticut, said that the variant makes up more than 80 percent of cases there, though he also notes that the country is heterogenous and the variant likely has a different prevalence in different places.

"I don't know how the C.D.C. built their algorithm, but human beings made these programs, and humans are fallible," said Massimo Caputi, a molecular virologist at the Florida Atlantic University School of Medicine. "At the end of the day you can predict as much as you want but you need to look at the numbers you have in your hand."

Dr. O'Connor, who is tracking Omicron in Wisconsin, said the variant made up half of cases on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus in just three days. "If I was making a betting prediction, it wasn't so much that the number 73 percent was wrong, but the timing to get there was wrong," he said.

These predictions will likely become more accurate over time as more data on Omicron is collected.

More precise numbers will be needed to smartly distribute Covid treatments. One of the great challenges of Omicron is the variant's ability to [thwart](#) two of the three monoclonal antibody treatments, which can prevent serious illness in Covid-19 patients. As such, some hospitals have begun scaling back these treatments; administrators at NewYork-Presbyterian, N.Y.U. Langone and Mount Sinai all said they would stop giving patients the two treatments that are ineffective against Omicron. But the drugs could still help people infected with Delta.

"If you still have those Delta cases, discontinuing monoclonals means all those people who would have benefited from them won't be receiving them at all," Dr. O'Connor said.

Dr. O'Connor said scientists and health care providers need to do a better job of communicating the uncertainty in the predications they share with the public. "Having the humility to acknowledge that there's a lot that no one knows and is unknowable right now is going to be really important."

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HEADLINE	12/28 Shorter isolation periods spread virus?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/28/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#will-shortened-isolation-periods-spread-the-virus

GIST	<p>The decision by federal health officials to shorten isolation periods for Americans infected with the coronavirus drew both tempered support and intense opposition from scientists on Tuesday.</p> <p>One of the main points of contention was the absence of a testing requirement and fears that the omission could hasten the spread of the highly contagious Omicron variant.</p> <p>The new guidance, coming amid a crush of new infections that has starved many hospitals of workers, seemed to some scientists like a necessary step to shore up work forces in essential industries. And encouraging people to leave isolation early after testing negative could spare them the hardships of prolonged periods at home.</p> <p>But letting hundreds of thousands of infected people forgo those tests — even if, crucially, their symptoms were not entirely gone — risks seeding new cases and heaping even more pressure on already overburdened health systems, experts said in interviews on Tuesday.</p> <p>“To me, this feels honestly more about economics than about the science,” said Yonatan Grad, an associate professor of immunology and infectious diseases at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, who has tracked coronavirus infections in the National Basketball Association.</p> <p>Dr. Rochelle P. Walensky, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said in an interview on Tuesday that the new guidance had been necessitated by the volume of people about to be infected.</p> <p>The C.D.C.’s recommendations cut isolation periods for infected people from 10 days to five. The agency did not recommend rapid testing before people left isolation, but asked infected people to wear a mask around others for five days.</p> <p>But some scientists maintain that rapid tests are the most convenient indication of whether or not someone remains contagious. Regulatory delays, manufacturing problems and shortfalls in government support have left rapid tests in extremely short supply as the Omicron variant has surged, pushing caseloads to near record levels in the United States.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Colleges delay start dates or go online
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/28/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#many-universities-citing-the-omicron-surge-push-start-dates-back-or-move-to-online-instruction
GIST	<p>As the highly contagious Omicron variant sends U.S. case rates higher, a stream of colleges and universities around the country have announced that classes will be delayed or will begin remotely in January.</p> <p>For some students, the revised plans are a decidedly unwelcome development following almost two years of online instruction, limited gatherings, testing protocols and uncertainty.</p> <p>At Syracuse University, David Bruen, the student body president, said he supported the university’s decision to delay its start by one week, to Jan. 24, despite his feelings of disappointment.</p> <p>“I’m someone who really believes in what’s best for public health,” said Mr. Bruen, 20, a political science major. “But the fact that this keeps going on is just frustrating and stressful and sad.”</p> <p>The decisions, made after consulting experts who said that transmission of the virus will likely surge after the holiday break, were not universal. Some major colleges, including the University of Michigan and Northeastern University, stood firm, stating that classes would begin as usual, even as the schools imposed a booster requirement. But broadly, fears are rising that campus life in 2022 could be a repeat of 2020.</p>

In some cases, students were advised, it would be best to remain at home for a while, if possible. Others announced new requirements that students receive booster shots and wear KN95 masks.

Howard University in Washington, D.C., was the most recent school to announce a delayed start. The university [tweeted](#) on Monday that it had seen a “concerning increase in percentage and the number of positive cases over the past three weeks,” delaying the start of its semester to Jan. 18.

Also on Monday, Princeton University [said](#) it would begin classes as scheduled on Jan. 24, but delayed the return of students by one week to Jan. 14, with students arriving gradually over 10 days. The university also said it would ban travel by students outside the campus vicinity until mid-February.

In Houston, Rice University sent a [message](#) to students Sunday announcing the delay of in-person classes until Jan. 24. The university said it was strongly encouraging students not to arrive on campus until the weekend of Jan. 22.

On Dec. 21, New York University posted an [announcement](#) that January classes would be held online. So did [Columbia](#). Both schools advised faculty and staff to work remotely.

[Binghamton University](#) and the [University of Illinois](#) announced one-week delays in the start of classes. [Wayne State University](#) in Detroit announced that classes would be held online for at least three weeks and imposed a booster shot requirement.

Ka Yee C. Lee, the University of Chicago provost, [announced](#) a one-week delay and then two weeks of remote instruction until Jan. 24. Undergraduates living in residence halls were strongly encouraged to delay their return to campus until at least Jan. 20.

In California, some schools were moving classes online and others were imposing new vaccine requirements. Seven schools in the University of California system, including U.C.L.A., [announced](#) that classes would be remote for the first two weeks of the quarter. Other schools said they were either delaying in-person classes for one week or evaluating possible changes.

And the [University of Pennsylvania](#) moved classes online for two weeks and delayed campus housing move in.

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HEADLINE	12/28 Omicron shorter incubation period: 72hrs
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/28/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#omicron-covid-contagious-cdc
GIST	<p>Days before the United States had its first confirmed case of the Omicron variant on Dec. 1 in California, health officials in Nebraska began looking into six probable cases of coronavirus infection in one household, among them a 48-year-old unvaccinated man who had recently returned from a conference in Nigeria.</p> <p>On Dec. 2, the Nebraska Public Health Laboratory identified the Omicron variant as the cause in all six people, who ranged in age from 11 to 48. A study of the group released on Tuesday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggested that Omicron may have a shorter incubation period than previous variants: about 72 hours.</p> <p>It may take as little as three days for people to develop symptoms, become contagious and test positive, compared with four to six days with Delta infections and those caused by original coronavirus, the authors observed.</p> <p>Only one member of the household was fully vaccinated, and all but one member, including the traveler, had experienced confirmed infections in 2020. No household members reported underlying medical conditions.</p>

	<p>The study also reported that the family members experienced mild symptoms. The six described their illnesses as similar to, or milder than, those experienced during their first infection.</p> <p>“It is unknown whether the mild clinical syndromes or differing symptom descriptions are a result of existing immunity or altered clinical features associated with Omicron infection,” the study’s authors wrote.</p> <p>“The five reinfections, including one after full vaccination, might be explained by waning immunity, the potential for partial immune evasion by Omicron, or both.”</p> <p>A study in Norway that examined a large cluster of individuals who were infected with the variant at a Christmas party in Oslo also suggested that the incubation period was around three days. It is not yet clear how long people remain infectious with Omicron.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Positive Quebec essential workers still work
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/28/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#quebec-health-workers-positive-covid
GIST	<p>Quebec, which is fighting the highest infection levels in Canada, announced on Tuesday that health care workers in the province who test positive for the coronavirus will continue working under certain circumstances.</p> <p>All essential workers in the province, including those who work in medicine, will be subject to the new rules, Christian Dubé, Quebec’s minister of health and social services, said in a news briefing. He said that workers who test positive will keep working “according to a list of priority and risk management.” He did not provide details but said more information would be released in the coming days.</p> <p>During previous waves, Mr. Dubé said, the goal had been to “identify and remove at-risk employees as quickly as possible.” But given the highly contagious nature of the Omicron variant, and so many people being infected and having to be pulled out of work, he said, “we have to do otherwise. We have no choice.”</p> <p>The average number of new cases per day in Quebec has risen 376 percent in the past two weeks, and the seven-day average of new daily cases in the province is over 8,000, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University. That number makes up more than half of Canada’s new cases every day, on average.</p> <p>The strain on health care workers around the world has been building since the beginning of the pandemic, and experts have warned that they are nearing a breaking point. In October, the World Health Organization estimated that more than 100,000 health care workers had died of Covid and urged countries to do more to protect them.</p> <p>In the United States, some states called in the National Guard this month to help run hospitals and nursing homes that have been hit hard by staff shortages and illness among their employees.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Fears of omicron as unstoppable threat
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/28/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#fears-of-omicron-as-an-unstoppable-threat-are-tempered-by-signs-of-milder-symptoms
GIST	<p>The Omicron variant is blazing around the world with such speed that even the leader of Israel, one of the most highly vaccinated countries, warned on Tuesday that it cannot be stopped.</p> <p>“We can’t prevent it,” Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said, in blunt comments that reflected a growing consensus in nations where Omicron has caught fire: The virus is moving too fast to catch.</p>

That daunting notion — backed up by data from nations where Omicron is spreading rapidly only a month after it was first detected — is tempered by early evidence that the variant causes milder symptoms, with vaccinations and boosters helping prevent serious illness and death.

Many experts worldwide have expressed concern that the sheer number of people who are likely to be infected could create a flood of patients, overwhelming already stressed health care systems. But that is running up against those who argue that it is time to accept that the virus is endemic, and that countries should move away from lockdowns and toward laxer rules including shorter quarantines.

John Bell, a professor of medicine at Oxford University and an adviser to the British government, said that Omicron was “not the same disease we were seeing a year ago.”

“The horrific scenes that we saw a year ago of intensive care units being full, lots of people dying prematurely, that is now history, in my view, and I think we should be reassured that that’s likely to continue,” he told the BBC on Tuesday.

While the latest figures in Britain are incomplete because of the Christmas holiday, data published on Monday indicated that more than 300,000 new Covid cases had been recorded between Saturday and Monday.

But Chris Hopson, the head of N.H.S. Providers, the membership organization for England’s health staff, said that while hospitalizations across Britain had risen, it was not a precipitous jump.

“What’s very interesting is how many are talking about number of asymptomatic patients being admitted to hospital for other reasons and then testing positive for Covid,” he said of conversations with heads of hospitals, [in a series of posts on Twitter](#).

“Some are describing this as ‘incidental Covid.’”

Britain appears to be a few weeks ahead of most other nations in the world in [confronting the first wave of Omicron infection](#) and, for the moment, has decided that the evidence does not warrant new restrictions.

But the United Kingdom is hardly united in how to respond to the moment. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all started new curbs this week to slow the spread of Omicron, largely focusing on reducing indoor mixing.

Across Europe, [divisions can be seen](#) in how to respond to what Prime Minister Jean Castex of France on Monday called a “film without ending.” His country is seeing a record number of cases, putting extra pressure on intensive care units in public hospitals.

All the tools the world has grown familiar with over the past two years — lockdowns, passes proving vaccination status, limits on private gatherings, mask mandates, social distancing — are being deployed to different degrees across the continent.

And pushback continues to build.

On Monday night, [thousands of people](#) took to the streets of Germany to protest new measures under which all nightclubs will be closed, private meetings of more than 10 people will be banned and further restrictions will be put in place on movie theaters and cultural and sporting events.

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HEADLINE	12/28 Omicron infection defend against delta?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/28/health/covid-omicron-antibodies-delta.html

People who have recovered from an infection with the new Omicron coronavirus variant may be able to fend off later infections from the Delta variant, according to a new laboratory study carried out by South African scientists.

If further experiments confirm these findings, they could suggest a less dire future for the pandemic. In the short term, Omicron is expected to create a surge of cases that will put a massive strain on economies and health care systems around the world. But in the longer term, the new research suggests that an Omicron-dominated world might experience fewer hospitalizations and deaths than one in which Delta continues to rage.

“Omicron is likely to push Delta out,” said Alex Sigal, a virologist at the Africa Health Research Institute in Durban, South Africa, who led the new study. “Maybe pushing Delta out is actually a good thing, and we’re looking at something we can live with more easily and that will disrupt us less than the previous variants.”

He posted the new study on the institute’s [website](#) on Monday. It has not yet been published in a scientific journal.

Independent scientists said that the results of the South African experiment, though preliminary, were sound. Carl Pearson, an epidemiologist at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, said the findings were consistent with what is now happening in England.

“Omicron arrives and grows rapidly, and the Delta trend switches to declining,” he said.

And Nathan Grubaugh, an epidemiologist at the Yale School of Public Health, said he was observing the same pattern in Connecticut. “We are seeing Omicron exponentially rise while Delta cases are falling,” he said. “This suggests to me that Omicron is outcompeting Delta for susceptible individuals, leaving them less susceptible to Delta in the aftermath, and driving down Delta cases.”

When people began getting infected with the coronavirus two years ago, they produced antibodies and immune cells that could provide protection against it. As a result, it was very rare for a person to be reinfected in the months that followed.

But starting in late 2020, new coronavirus variants emerged. Some of them, like Alpha, had mutations enabling them to spread rapidly. Others, like Beta, had adaptations that allowed them to evade antibodies — whether they were produced during a prior infection or in response to a Covid-19 vaccine.

Delta, which came to prominence in the summer of 2021, had mutations that gave it both a superior ability to spread and a moderate ability to evade antibodies. Vaccines still remained effective against Delta, but not quite as much as they had been earlier in the pandemic.

When Omicron emerged in November, it spread faster than even Delta had. Researchers suspected that its speed had two sources. Somehow it was able to transmit quickly — perhaps by replicating in large numbers or by [spreading more easily](#) from one person to the next. Omicron was also able to infect vaccinated people and those who had gotten sick with earlier variants.

In an earlier study this month, Dr. Sigal’s team, as well as a number of other research groups, [confirmed](#) Omicron’s ability to dodge antibodies from vaccines and earlier variants. To do so, they analyzed blood from people who were either vaccinated or had recovered from Covid, and mixed it with different variants.

Time and again, antibodies that were very potent against Delta and other variants did a poor job against Omicron. This helped to explain why so many vaccinated and previously infected people were coming down with bouts of Omicron, albeit milder than Delta infections.

In their new study, Dr. Sigal and his colleagues ran the same experiment, but this time on people who had recovered from Omicron infections. Although South Africa has just gone through a huge spike in Omicron cases, Dr. Sigal and his colleagues have so far only been able to study 13 patients.

“This was very difficult because of the holiday period,” he said. “Nobody really wants to stick around and be part of a study.”

Seven of the patients were vaccinated and six were not. The scientists did not determine which volunteers had been previously infected with other variants of Covid. But given that the vast majority of South Africans had Covid before Omicron, it’s likely that most of the volunteers had not been infected for the first time with Omicron.

The researchers found, unsurprisingly, that the patients’ blood contained a high level of antibodies potent against Omicron. But those antibodies proved effective against Delta, too.

This was particularly surprising because the team’s study from earlier this month showed that the converse was not true: Antibodies produced after a Delta infection offered little protection against Omicron.

As Omicron races through country after country, Dr. Sigal speculated that it would leave people with immunity not just to itself, but to Delta as well. That would mean that people who get infected with Delta will have fewer opportunities to pass on the virus to others. At the same time, Omicron will readily infect people who have recovered from Delta. That competitive edge could spell doom for Delta.

Of course, that’s a lot of speculation about the future health of billions of people based on only 13 volunteers. What’s more, Dr. Sigal can’t say exactly what accounts for the benefit Omicron provides against Delta. It’s possible that the antibodies it produces act more broadly against other variants as well.

Alternatively, it’s also possible that the Omicron infections simply roused the existing immunity in volunteers, provided either by vaccinations or previous infections. If that’s true, then it remains to be seen what will happen to unvaccinated people who get infected for the first time with Omicron — a fate that millions of Americans may experience in the weeks to come.

Even if Omicron does wipe out Delta, that doesn’t mean that Omicron will reign supreme for generations. Once people gain immunity to Omicron, natural selection may favor mutations that produce a new variant that can evade that immunity.

Depending on the particulars of the coronavirus, Dr. Pearson said he could foresee three different futures.

In one, Covid mimics the flu, with one seasonal variant pushing out the previous one, year after year.

In a second, Covid mimics dengue fever, with several variants coexisting that evade different antibodies, leading people to get sick every few years from one of them.

The third possibility is the most desirable: One variant wins out and becomes an easily prevented pathogen. But Dr. Pearson considers that the least likely scenario.

“I’d bet we can rule out that it’s trending to a place where it locks into a single variety that’s long-term immunizing and becomes a childhood infection like measles,” he said. “But that’s also still possible.”

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HEADLINE	12/28 Chile rewrites constitution: climate change
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/28/climate/chile-constitution-climate-change.html
GIST	SALAR DE ATACAMA, Chile — Rarely does a country get a chance to lay out its ideals as a nation and write a new constitution for itself. Almost never does the climate and ecological crisis play a central role.

That is, until now, in Chile, where a national reinvention is underway. After months of protests over social and environmental grievances, 155 Chileans have been elected to write a new constitution amid what they have declared a “climate and ecological emergency.”

Their work will not only shape how this country of 19 million is governed. It will also determine the future of a soft, lustrous metal, lithium, lurking in the salt waters beneath this vast ethereal desert beside the Andes Mountains.

Lithium is an essential component of batteries. And as the global economy seeks alternatives to fossil fuels to slow down climate change, lithium demand — and prices — are soaring.

Mining companies in Chile, the world’s second-largest lithium producer after Australia, are keen to increase production, as are politicians who see mining as crucial to national prosperity. They face mounting opposition, though, from Chileans who argue that the country’s very economic model, based on extraction of natural resources, has exacted too high an environmental cost and failed to spread the benefits to all citizens, including its Indigenous people.

And so, it falls to the Constitutional Convention to decide what kind of country Chile wants to be. Convention members will decide many things, including: How should mining be regulated, and what voice should local communities have over mining? Should Chile retain a presidential system? Should nature have rights? How about future generations?

Around the world, nations face similar dilemmas — in the forests of central Africa, in Native American territories in the United States — as they try to tackle the climate crisis without repeating past mistakes.

For Chile, the issue now stands to shape the national charter. “We have to assume that human activity causes damage, so how much damage do we want to cause?” said Cristina Dorador Ortiz, a microbiologist who studies the salt flats and is in the Constitutional Convention. “What is enough damage to live well?”

Then there’s water. Amid a crippling drought supercharged by climate change, the Convention will decide who owns Chile’s water. It will also weigh something more basic: What exactly *is* water?

Chile’s current constitution was written in 1980, by people handpicked by its then military ruler, Augusto Pinochet. It opened the country to mining investments and allowed water rights to be bought and sold.

Chile prospered by exploiting its natural riches: copper and coal, salmon and avocados. But even as it became one of Latin America’s richest nations, frustrations mounted over inequality. Mineral-rich areas became known as “sacrifice zones” of environmental degradation. Rivers began drying up.

Anger boiled over into huge protests starting in 2019. A national referendum followed, electing a diverse panel to rewrite the constitution.

On Dec. 19 came another turning point. Voters elected Gabriel Boric, a 35-year-old former student activist, as president. He had campaigned to expand the social safety net, increase mining royalties and taxes, and create a national lithium company.

The morning after his victory, the stock price of the country’s biggest lithium producer, Sociedad Química y Minera de Chile, or SQM, fell 15 percent.

The Father of Volcanoes

One fifth of the world’s lithium is produced by SQM, most of it in the Atacama Desert in northern Chile in the shadow of ancient volcanoes, including the oldest and still-active one, Lascar. The Lickanantay, the area’s Indigenous people, call Lascar the father of all volcanoes.

From above, the mine looks as though someone has spread a glistening blue and green quilt in the middle of this pale desert.

The riches lie in the brine underground. Day and night, SQM pumps out the brine, along with freshwater from five wells. Pipes carry brine to a series of ponds.

Then, the sun goes to work.

The Atacama has the [highest solar radiation](#) levels on Earth. Water evaporates astonishingly fast, leaving mineral deposits behind. Magnesium comes out of the ponds. Also potassium. Lithium remains in a viscous yellow green pool, which SQM converts into powdery white lithium carbonate for battery makers abroad.

SQM was a state-owned maker of fertilizer chemicals until Mr. Pinochet turned it over to his then son-in-law, [Julio Ponce Lerou](#), in 1983. More recently, it has been fined by Chile's stock market regulator and by the [U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission](#) over violations of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act. Mr. Ponce, no longer chairman, retains 30 percent ownership.

Today, SQM is riding a lithium bull market. Carlos Díaz, its vice president for lithium, said the company is seeking to increase capacity from 140,000 tons of lithium carbonate to 180,000 tons by 2022. Mr. Díaz said the firm wants to "produce lithium as green as possible," including by reducing saltwater extraction by half by 2030 and by becoming "carbon neutral" by 2040.

There is good reason. Nearby, a copper mine, called Escondida, was [fined \\$93 million](#) for extracting water and causing what a Chilean court called "irreparable damage."

The mining industry is bracing for change. A law to increase royalties is working through the legislature. And the Constitutional Convention is weighing provisions that could require more local decision-making.

Joaquin Villarino, president of the Mining Council, the industry lobby, said both could diminish Chile's appeal to investors. He voiced particular worry that some of the Convention members appeared to be against mining altogether, though he didn't name any. "I hope this is not what we will have in our Constitution," he said, "because Chile is a mining country."

The Convention is also likely to make water a public good. But another question will bear on the industry even more: Is brine — the saltwater beneath the desert — technically water? Mining companies assert it is not, because it is fit for neither human nor animal consumption.

"There is a clear separation between what is coming from the mountain, that is the continental water, and what you have in the brine in the Salar de Atacama," Mr. Díaz said.

Brine extraction is currently governed by the mining code. The new constitution could change that. It could call brine water.

Crisis in a Bright Lagoon

In the shadow of Lascar, not far from the SQM mine, shimmers a lagoon encrusted in bright, white salt. Jordán Jofré Lique, a geologist who works with the Atacama Indigenous Council, walks along its edge. A solitary flamingo crosses the salt crust.

The bird is looking for food, mainly brine shrimp, and this afternoon the lake is unusually dry. Mr. Lique, 28, isn't sure why. But it worries him. The health of the *salar* (salt flat in Spanish) constantly worries him, considering two major forces beyond his control: the warming of the planet and the mining industry's extraction of water here in one of the world's driest regions. The flamingo gives up its search, unfurls its pale pink wings and flies.

Mr. Lique, a Lickanantay man, knows the tracks of the salt flat. His grandfather herded sheep and goats here.

He was once set to go work for a mining company. It was a path to a good salary. Instead, he found himself studying the effects of mining on his people's land. "Maybe it was an act of God or life's circumstances," he said.

Some Indigenous people say mining companies have divided their communities with offers of money and jobs. Mr. Lique's organization is shunned by some people because it accepts research funds from Albemarle, an American company that also mines lithium locally.

His group has installed more than a dozen sensors to measure water levels, salinity and temperature. He is particularly worried about "the mixing zone," a sensitive ecosystem, where freshwater coexists with saltwater underground. The bright evaporation ponds act like mirrors, which Mr. Lique suspects heats the air.

Independent research has found [declining soil moisture](#) and ground cover in the salt flat, along with rising daytime temperatures, evidence of a strong correlation between the expansion of lithium mining and the drying of the area.

A government census has recorded a slight decline in the Andean flamingo population in the Atacama since 1997, whereas their numbers remain unchanged elsewhere in Chile. Alejandra Castro, a park ranger in charge of flamingo reserves, suspects climate change.

SQM says its monitors show brine levels decreasing marginally in the mixing zone, and that the flora and fauna remain healthy.

The Atacama is full of surprises. Parts of it are so dry the ground is sharp and craggy, with no vegetation. Then the landscape changes suddenly, giving way to ankle-high shrubs, or a forest of towering tamarugo trees. A dirt road twists through the bare ochre hills, depositing you abruptly in a ravine carrying mountain spring water.

Mr. Lique sees the compounding effects of climate change. Water on his family's farm, near the mine, evaporates more quickly. Rains are more extreme. One alfalfa patch didn't grow this year. The corn is short.

But Mr. Lique is most worried about how the extraction of so much brine could change the delicate equilibrium of sun, earth and water, especially amid climate change. "The best scenario is that it doesn't get worse than this," he said. "The worst scenario is that everything dries up."

Clues to the Future

Dr. Dorador, the Constitutional Convention member, walks through a busy market in her hometown, Antofagasta. "The Constitution is the most important law in the country," she tells a man selling mangoes.

He listens politely.

Dr. Dorador, 41, describes what the assembly is discussing — water, housing, health care. She explains the timeline: a draft constitution by July, followed by a national vote.

Behind her, a man yells out the price of corn. Another is selling rabbits. One woman vents about shoulder pain. A few tell her they have no time.

Dr. Dorador became drawn to the microorganisms that have survived for millions of years in the salt flats. "We can learn a lot of things about climate change studying the *salares*, because they are already extreme," she said. "You can find clues of the past and also clues of the future."

Dr. Dorador is vying to be the convention's president. She wants the constitution to recognize that "humans are part of nature." She bristles when asked if lithium extraction is necessary to pivot away from fossil fuel extraction. Of course the world should stop burning oil and gas, she says, but not by ignoring

yet unknown ecological costs. “Someone buys an electric car and feels very good because they’re saving the planet,” she says. “At the same time an entire ecosystem is damaged. It’s a big paradox.”

Indeed the questions facing this Convention aren’t Chile’s alone. The world faces the same reckoning as it confronts climate change and biodiversity loss, amid widening social inequities: Does the search for climate fixes require re-examining humanity’s relationship to nature itself?

“We have to face some very complex 21st century problems,” said Maisa Rojas, a climate scientist at the University of Chile. “Our institutions are, in many respects, not ready.”

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HEADLINE	12/28 China secret residential surveillance system
SOURCE	https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/28/thousands-detained-in-chinas-residential-surveillance-system
GIST	<p>On September 24, Chinese authorities released Canadians Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig after detaining them for more than 1,000 days. The pair were not held in an ordinary prison but were instead placed in “Residential Surveillance at a Designated Location” (RSDL), conditions that have been compared with enforced disappearance by rights groups.</p> <p>Both Canadians had limited access to a lawyer or consular services and lived in cells with lights on 24 hours a day.</p> <p>Following changes to Chinese criminal law in 2012, police now have had the right to detain anyone – foreign or Chinese – for up to six months at a designated location without disclosing their whereabouts. Spain-based rights group Safeguard Defenders say that as many as 27,208 to 56,963 people have gone through China’s RSDL system since 2013, citing data from the Supreme People’s Court and the testimony of survivors and lawyers.</p> <p>“These high profile cases obviously attract a lot of attention, but they shouldn’t detract from the fact that there’s no transparency. Collecting the data that is available and analysing the trends, the estimate is every year 4 to 5,000 people are disappeared into the RSDL system alone,” said Michael Caster, a co-founder of rights watchdog Safeguard Defenders.</p> <p>Caster estimated that in 2020 between 10,000 to 15,000 went through the system, up from just 500 in 2013.</p> <p>The number includes well-known names like artist Ai Wei Wei and human rights lawyers Wang Yu and Wang Quanzhang, who were caught up in China’s 2015 crackdown on human rights defenders. Other foreigners have also gone through RSDL, like Peter Dahlin, a Swedish activist and co-founder of Safeguard Defenders, and Canadian missionaries Kevin and Julia Garrett, who were accused of espionage in 2014.</p> <p>William Nee, a research and advocacy coordinator at China Human Rights Defenders, said since RSDL was first employed almost a decade ago, use of the extrajudicial detention system has changed from an exception in its early days to a more widely used tool.</p> <p>“Before, when Ai Wei Wei was taken away, they had to make an excuse that it was really about his business, or a tax issue or something like that. So there’s this trend, a decade or two ago, where they would use a pretence to detain someone when the real reason was their public participation or their political views,” said Nee. “There was a fear that [RSDL] was going to make it more routine ‘legal,’ given a veneer of legality and legitimacy to it. And I think that’s been well borne out.”</p> <p>Communist Party members, state employees, and anyone involved in “public affairs” are held in a similar parallel system known as liuzhi. Since its introduction in 2018, an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 people have been held in liuzhi each year, according to the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights.</p>

Conditions under both RSDL and liuzhi have been described as tantamount to torture, and inmates are held without a right to legal counsel. Sleep deprivation, isolation, solitary confinement, beatings, and forced stress positions have been reported by survivors of both systems, according to multiple rights groups. In some cases, inmates may be placed in an infamous “tiger chair” which restricts limb movement for days at a time.

Together, RSDL, liuzhi and similar extrajudicial procedures have “systematised arbitrary and secret detention,” said Caster.

Al Jazeera contacted China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs for comment, but did not received a reply at the time of publication.

China has previously accused organisations like the UN Working Group on Enforced Disappearances for misrepresenting its use of RSDL, the practice of which it says is governed by its criminal code as an alternative to arresting a criminal suspect. It has also said that under China’s constitution, it is against the law to illegally detain an individual or deprive them of their personal freedom.

When asked about Spavor and Kovrig during their detention, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that while the pair were suspected of endangering national security their “lawful rights had been guaranteed” and they were not held in “arbitrary detention” while their cases moved forward “in accordance with the law.”

The pair’s detention in 2018 was widely seen as retaliation for the arrest of Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou by Canadian authorities at the request of the United States. Meng was wanted by the US Department of Justice for allegedly helping the Chinese tech giant conduct business in Iran despite US sanctions.

Shortly before their release, Spavor, a businessman who worked in North Korea, was found guilty of espionage and sentenced to 11 years in prison while Kovrig had yet to face sentencing. The pair escaped further prison time when Canada finally allowed Meng to return to China after living under house arrest, but for many people, RSDL is just the beginning.

Ongoing cases over the past year have included Cheng Lei, a dual Chinese Australian TV anchor who was placed under RSDL in August 2020 and later arrested on “suspicion of illegally supplying state secrets overseas,” and human rights lawyer Chang Weiping, who has been in and out of detention since early 2020 for taking part in a discussion about democracy. He was later detained again after he described his experience in RSDL on YouTube.

Caster said cases like these with well-known names are just the “tip of the iceberg”.

“For the hundreds or thousands of members of civil society who don’t have their own Wikipedia entry, they might be held for the maximum amount of time under one of these systems. And then they’re released into criminal detention to wait as the investigation continues,” he said.

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HEADLINE	12/28 Experts slam CDC decision as ‘reckless’
SOURCE	https://www.newsweek.com/health-experts-alarmed-cdc-cutting-covid-isolation-time-reckless-1663548
GIST	<p>Several experts on immunology and epidemiology have criticized the decision by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to reduce the self-isolation period for those who test positive for COVID-19.</p> <p>The CDC announced on Monday that those who test positive and are asymptomatic should now isolate for five days instead of 10, citing evidence that people are most infectious two days before they develop symptoms and three days afterward.</p>

However, some health experts expressed confusion and apparent anger at the CDC's updated advice with one professor of immunology taking to [Twitter](#) to say the decision left him "baffled."

Epidemiologist and immunologist Michael Mina tweeted: "CDC's new guidance to drop isolation of positives to 5 days without a negative test is reckless."

"Some ppl stay infectious 3 days, Some 12," he wrote.

"I absolutely don't want to sit next to someone who turned Pos 5 days ago and hasn't tested Neg," he went on. "Test Neg to leave isolation early is just smart."

Mina criticized the idea that those with COVID should end isolation before testing negative and also took aim at the CDC's claims about when patients are most infectious, arguing that information predated the Omicron variant.

Erin Bromage, associate professor of comparative immunology at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, expressed similar concerns. He shared two images of positive COVID tests on Twitter by way of explanation.

"I am baffled at CDC's decision to shorten isolation," Bromage wrote. "Here are tests from the same person: day 0 (3 days after exposure) and day 8. The person still has a huge amount of virus in their nose 8 days after testing positive."

Bromage said he oversees the testing of thousands of people each week in workplace surveillance programs.

"As we do not want to have workplace transmission, we ensure that [w]hen we have a positive we do not return them to work too soon. Workplace transmission would shut us down (union rules) so we are cautious and use data to return people," he wrote.

Eric Feigl-Ding, an epidemiologist and health economist, highlighted the surge in the Omicron variant of the virus across the U.S. as he questioned the CDC's decision.

"50% CUT—does this make sense—CDC shortens #COVID19 isolation period for those without symptoms (self-reported) to just 5 days, instead of 10," Feigl-Ding wrote. "All while #Omicron cases surpassing last year's peaks with hospitalizations up too—I really worry about this."

Feigl-Ding noted in a later tweet that CDC advice differs from the situation in the U.K. where two negative tests are required to exit isolation before 10 days.

"But somehow a 5 day exit with 0 negative test is okay in [the U.S.]? American exceptionalism does not apply to a pandemic virus," he wrote.

Patrick Hickey, chair and professor of pediatrics at Uniformed Services University, retweeted Feigl-Ding and added simply: "Co-sign."

The CDC advised on Monday that those who test positive but are asymptomatic should wear masks around other people for five days after leaving isolation.

The agency also recommends that unvaccinated people and those who received their second mRNA vaccine dose more than six months ago and aren't boosted should isolate for five days if they are exposed to the virus. They should then wear masks around others for a further five days.

CDC director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said on Monday that many cases of the Omicron variant "are going to be asymptomatic."

	<p>"We want to make sure there is a mechanism by which we can safely continue to keep society functioning while following the science," she said.</p> <p><i>Newsweek</i> has asked the CDC for comment.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Female veterans' PTSD; suffer govt. letdown
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/dec/28/female-veterans-suffering-trauma-let-down-us-healthcare
GIST	<p>For Felicia Merkel, the PTSD trigger is any loud sound – an overhead speaker, a slammed car door – transporting her back to the blistering heat of Afghanistan. For Liz Hensel, it is looking into her daughter's chestnut brown eyes, their color reminding her of those of a young Afghan girl named Medina, who lost her mother and leg at the trauma hospital in Kandahar. For Jen Burch, the intrusive memory is of the man who assaulted her before she deployed.</p> <p>More than a decade has passed since these three women were deployed to Afghanistan. It's now almost four months since the US military withdrew from Kabul on 30 August. Still, specific memories consume them. Three hundred thousand female veterans served in the 19-year war, and as media coverage dwindles and the nation slowly forgets, Felicia, Liz and Jen continue to remember.</p> <p>Their experiences in Afghanistan differed from those of the male soldiers with whom they served. Now, their stateside lives do too. Being a woman in war comes with its own set of distinct traumas. While congressional legislation that has recently been proposed is welcome, essential bills are still being blocked that would help repair the suffering these women have endured for years.</p> <p>Gender differences exist in trauma exposure. PTSD is twice as common in women than in men, according to a study conducted by Kathryn Magruder at the University of South Carolina.</p> <p>Yet they face additional obstacles when seeking support after their deployment.</p> <p>The Deborah Sampson Act passed in January of this year made gender-specific services available at veteran medical centers across the country.</p> <p>However, on 6 December, House and Senate armed service committee leaders tried to block the Military Justice Improvement and Increasing Prevention Act, which would enable veterans to report sexual assault to a neutral third party.</p> <p>Felicia's husband says she is a lot jumpier now than she used to be. Talking about Afghanistan makes her sad, but as she has gotten older, sounds, not memories, trigger her PTSD. The anxiety hits. She breathes deeply. Then tries, with difficulty, to get her heart rate down.</p> <p>It was December 2010, the year of her first deployment. She was lying in bed at the base at Kandahar, watching American television, when she heard those crashing bumps. Seconds later, the sirens sounded. A rocket had hit. Felicia fell to the floor with a thud and ran for the nearby bunker.</p> <p>It was cold and dusty in there; a dirt track enveloped in a hollow concrete shell. Just feet away, medics worked on a man wounded in the chest; he had no pulse in his left leg. They called for clothing, anything that might be used to stop the bleeding. As the yells of the medics got louder, Felicia's mind traveled further away.</p> <p>She couldn't do anything to help. Eleven years later, she still feels that guilt and hears those sounds.</p> <p>She had arrived in Kandahar energetic and excited. She returned to Minnesota a year later, distant and dejected. The months after coming home were the worst. Gritting her teeth through weekly therapy sessions, she insisted that everything was fine. The therapist believed her, even telling her not to come back.</p>

On 4 January 2012, Felicia tried to kill herself. She began with a single antidepressant. Then she took five more. Then the bottle. None of her co-workers, family or friends knew about her clinical depression. She spent her 22nd birthday in intensive care.

Post-military support at the time, she maintains, was significantly lacking.

“Female service members have much more to deal with in the complexity of trauma,” confirmed Jennifer Pacanowski, founder of the non-profit Women’s Veterans Empowered and Thriving. “They also have less access to services, which are not as specialized to their needs as those available to male veterans.”

The Deborah Samson Act, a bipartisan bill passed by the Senate in January 2021, will establish a policy to end gender-based sexual harassment and assault by training employees and providing legal services for veterans at risk. It will also staff Veteran Affairs facilities with a permanent female health provider.

Felicia wishes she had access to these sorts of resources when she came home. Instead, during a 10-minute evaluation, it was determined she did not have PTSD, and that her grief stemmed only from her mother’s death.

She was furious and felt unheard.

Looking back, she believes that better healthcare policies for female veterans would have encouraged her to open up about her experiences and struggles sooner. Instead, she dealt with her feelings alone until she needed life-saving help.

After deploying in August 2010, Liz began volunteering at Kandahar’s trauma hospital. She had already witnessed death. Just weeks earlier, an injured soldier died with his head resting on her stomach. She dealt with this like any Marine had to do in any high-intensity combat situation: turn off emotion and focus.

She could not, however, turn off the memories of the trauma hospital. As the mother of two young daughters, it tugged at every maternal instinct she had.

American male service members were not permitted to work at the hospitals. Only because she was female could she see what she now can’t forget.

The waiting room that November day was bustling with uncles, fathers, cousins and brothers.

No one waited for Medina. Whoever brought the three-year-old Afghani girl had left. Her infected foot could not be saved, and Liz cradled the child as she came out of the anesthesia after the amputation. Rather than waking in familiar arms, Medina’s first sight was this stranger wearing desert camouflage with a pistol at her side. The anguish Liz felt reminded her that she could feel again after months surrounded by death.

Now, Medina revisits Liz’s thoughts back in Virginia. She appears in flashbacks when Liz looks at baby photographs of her youngest daughter. She comes to mind when Veterans Day is celebrated on national television.

Was the girl still alive? Could Liz have done more to help her? Was she attending school amid the Taliban’s ever-increasing restrictions on women’s freedom?

Liz had flown to Afghanistan fearless and determined in 2010 but returned to the US four months later, injured and traumatized.

In the weeks after her deployment, Liz felt as if she were watching someone else’s life in a movie. Physically, she was home, but mentally, she was in Kandahar.

She tried going through the motions expected of her as a mother and a wife. Doing menial tasks – cooking dinner, hugging her child – things she had been so capable of doing before she left. But it felt to her like a tug of war, the past pulling her back, her mind fighting to remain present.

It didn't help that she felt her pain was invisible to the world. When attending Veterans Affairs medical appointments, the administration staff would sometimes ask her husband, who came along for support, who he was there to see. He would have to correct them and say the appointment was for his wife.

It was only when they took the time to listen to Liz's story that people validated her trauma. Research shows that post-traumatic stress in veterans varies by gender. If hers had been recognized earlier, she wonders, would she still be struggling with it 11 years later?

Jen, like Liz, was working in Afghani hospitals because she was a woman. She, too, was haunted by a girl who had lost a foot. But, more, she was haunted by the long-term impacts of sexism and abuse in the military.

Jen was sexually assaulted by her supervisor at a US military base, months before she was deployed to Afghanistan in 2010.

She was made to report it through her chain of command, but was quickly stopped in her tracks. Everyone loved the man she was accusing.

"We're so glad to have him back," said the male officer who handled her complaint.

Jen wanted to deploy abroad. She knew no one would believe her. So she stopped, fearing that as a victim, she would be isolated.

But trauma builds on trauma. This experience made Jen more vulnerable to the horrors she witnessed during her service in Afghanistan. Statistically, a history of sexual assault puts a veteran at higher risk for developing PTSD.

Serving at Buckley Space Force Base in Denver, Colorado, when she returned stateside from August 2011 to 2014, things got worse.

Jen started to go through some of the lowest moments of her life.

Her co-workers assumed that she was being emotional about things because she was a woman. Someone she served with in Afghanistan observed that the only PTSD she had was from eating the bad food. This went on for a year and a half.

Jen was assaulted before she arrived in Afghanistan. She worked overtime in the trauma hospital doing mortuary affairs; developed breathing problems; had glass nodules in her lungs. Yet she was perpetually made fun of. It was a very negative culture surrounding her post-deployment.

No one wanted to hear her story.

Although women are the fastest-growing veteran demographic, she believes that some men still don't think of women serving in roles of high stress or exposure.

Currently, the Military Justice Improvement and Increasing Prevention Act is being blocked. If the act had been passed when Jen was on active service, she would have reported her sexual assault.

This is the same for many other women in the military, she believes. And while there is a mountain of legislation being passed to assist female veterans, this is still not enough.

	“If it means sharing the darkest details of my story, then I’ll keep doing this,” Jen said, “until the gendered gap in veteran healthcare is finally closed”.
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HEADLINE	12/28 American Red Cross workers speak out
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/dec/28/american-red-cross-workers-describe-exploitative-conditions
GIST	<p>Workers at the American Red Cross charity are speaking out about what they say is low pay, chronic understaffing, poor working conditions throughout the pandemic and proposed cuts to their healthcare.</p> <p>“The morale is at an all time low in my 23 years of history here,” said Darryl Ford, a collection technician at American Red Cross in Warner Robins, Georgia, and president of local union branch USW L254.</p> <p>He described Red Cross’ response to the pandemic as business as usual, as the non-profit ramped up blood drives anywhere they were able to hold them, since many typical blood drive sites closed when the pandemic hit.</p> <p>Ford also criticized the American Red Cross for doing little to nothing to clarify to the public that the blood donation drives were just testing for Covid-19 antibodies, not performing Covid-19 testing and providing inadequate PPE to workers.</p> <p>Due to the low pay, scheduling problems and working conditions, Ford noted that American Red Cross in his region experienced workers leaving throughout the pandemic.</p> <p>“People are quitting,” added Ford. “It’s a slap in the face to the employees for management to say ‘we’re going to cut your healthcare and not pay you anything, while we’re going to work from home and be safe.’”</p> <p>The Coalition of American Red Cross Unions, which represents about 4,900 workers from 11 international unions at American Red Cross across the US, is bargaining with the American Red Cross over the national addendum to the unions’ contracts, which expires on 31 March 2022.</p> <p>The unions are pushing for wage increases, to preserve existing healthcare plans and for solutions to address chronic staffing shortages around the US.</p> <p>The American Red Cross reported a revenue of more than \$2.8bn in the 2020 fiscal year and the CEO of the non-profit received a salary of more than \$700,000.</p> <p>The majority of its revenue, approximately \$1.73bn, went toward biomedical services, the part of the organization that collects blood donations and sells them to hospitals and healthcare providers. The American Red Cross provides about 40% of the nation’s blood supply.</p> <p>Workers who collect and manage blood donations for the non-profit continued working throughout the Covid-19 pandemic as essential workers.</p> <p>Alexis Zebrowski, a member of CWA Local 1118, worked as an aide specialist at the branch in Albany, New York for one year before quitting in November 2021 over the low pay around minimum wage, understaffing and working conditions through the pandemic.</p> <p>As an aide specialist, she collected platelet, plasma and blood donations, conducted medical physicals of donors and took patient histories and helped run blood donation drives, which she noted were consistently understaffed and resulted in work shifts that went at least one hour or longer past her scheduled ten-hour shift without being able to take breaks.</p>

“I can go work at any fast food restaurant and make more money,” said Zebrowski. “I was sick of the pay and all the constant bargaining and everything. The contracts still keep getting pushed out because they don’t want to give us a raise or even acknowledge anything we do for the company. It’s a slap in the face to work for the amount of money we are working for.”

She said the low pay and forced overtime led to worsening understaffing through the pandemic, with management rushing new hires through training and blaming existing staff when errors were made as a result.

“When we’re working, we’re expected to work at 100%, but we never have 100% in return,” added Zebrowski. “We’re always forced to come into work no matter what, sick or not, we were expected to be there. Otherwise, we’d be fearing for our job because we’d be too worried about being written up for attendance.”

Bobbie Terrell, a collections technician and member of AFSCME Council 31 at a branch in Peoria, Illinois, criticized American Red Cross for responding to chronic staffing shortages in her area by offering \$1,500 sign on bonuses for new hires and paying them higher wages, while the only appreciation or benefit that longtime employees have received is pizza.

“The people they’ve hired since November are significantly making more money than the staff who have been here for years,” said Terrell. “That’s a major slap in the face to the current staff that have worked through this whole pandemic and not been offered anything but pizza.”

She also expressed frustration with American Red Cross’s proposal to cut the employees’ health insurance benefits, saying she is concerned that cutting healthcare will worsen staffing problems. She also criticized the organization for not paying workers to quarantine after being exposed to donors or coworkers who test positive for Covid-19.

“Staff are being sent home for 10 to 14 days at a time, unpaid,” added Terrell. “We’re on the frontlines doing the job for them of collecting these life-saving products and basically they’re telling us that it’s at our own risk.”

A spokesperson for American Red Cross claimed the non-profit plans to offer wage increases and retention bonuses to existing employees. But the spokesperson added that the group has not yet reached an agreement with unions on the terms and how the raises will be implemented, in addition to ongoing negotiations over healthcare.

They noted employees were provided with pay to quarantine in Spring 2020 and from 21 November 2020 to 2 April 2021.

“Across the country, many employers are facing staffing shortages as a result of pandemic employment trends and vaccination requirements, which have exacerbated the challenges to recruit and retain staff,” said the spokesperson. “Over the past few months, the Red Cross actively recruited to fill vacancies on our biomedical services teams and have made significant investments in additional resources and tools to seek out and attract candidates, including new hire bonuses.”

The spokesperson added: “Our intention is to reach a fair and amicable agreement with the Coalition of Red Cross Unions and all of our local unions.”

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HEADLINE	12/28 Labor shortages in public transportation
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/12/28/worker-shortages-public-transportation/
GIST	In Houston, the public transportation system is offering new bus drivers bonuses of \$4,000. For mechanics, it’s \$8,000. In St. Louis, bus service has been cut by more than 10 percent. In New York, transportation officials are trying to lure retired subway operators back to their old jobs.

There just aren't enough workers to keep these systems running. Labor shortages are plaguing public transportation systems in nearly every big city, disrupting one of the critical support systems of modern urban life and complicating the recovery of an industry that has struggled mightily during the pandemic. This is raising new challenges for many cities, which have already been battered by the pandemic.

"I would characterize us in the midst of a labor crisis," said Taulby Roach, president of Bi-State Development, the nonprofit that runs St. Louis's public transportation system, Metro Transit. "There's no question."

The system is short about 150 positions out of about 1,400 to 1,500 front-line employees total, Taulby said — about 10 percent.

It is yet another sign of how deep the disruption to the labor market remains, nearly two years into the pandemic.

Complaints about the labor shortage have been loudest in industries with grueling and often low-wage work, including fast-food restaurants and hospitality. But the persistence of shortages in a field like public transportation shows the depth of complications for the labor market: Even some stable and well-paying jobs are no longer desirable to many workers, for a complicated range of reasons.

And a shortage of transportation workers can have ripple effects across a number of other fields. When bus routes are curtailed or trains run less frequently, it can disrupt the efforts of other workers to commute. And if costs go up to recruit more employees, riders could face higher fees.

Transit officials across the country described the issue as twofold: On one hand, there is now fierce competition for workers with commercial driver's licenses, the standard needed to drive buses in most municipalities in the country, as agencies compete with delivery services like FedEx, UPS and Amazon for workers. And on the other hand, attrition rates have skyrocketed, as burned-out transit workers have left for other jobs or early retirements. (Amazon founder Jeff Bezos owns The Washington Post.)

The bus-dominated St. Louis system has had to reduce service by about 10 to 12 percent to cope with the gap, reducing the frequency of some routes and eliminating a few express options outright.

"We have the budget capacity to maintain all of them," Roach said. "But quite frankly, we don't have the operators and it's really impacting service, and we're doing everything we can."

Attrition rates have been abnormally high. While St. Louis used to lose about seven operators a month, it has been losing between 21 and 25 a month since the early part of this year.

On top of that, hiring has proved challenging, although a \$2,000 bonus the agency began offering has helped sweeten the pot.

In Portland, Ore., the region's transit operator, TriMet, announced earlier this month that it would be reducing service by 9 percent because of similar labor woes. Hiring has proved to be the biggest obstacle there.

"Our recruitment numbers haven't been where they needed to be," said Tia York, a spokeswoman for the agency. "We've had weeks where there are just a handful of people in new operating training classes. Before the pandemic, we would hire dozens of people every month. We've gotten a little bit behind in hiring, and now with the national labor shortage, it's been a struggle to get the number of applicants we need to fill training classes and get new operators."

TriMet, which operates 84 bus routes over a 500-square-mile area, is down about 45 operator positions out of 1,000. Bus operator training is not a rapid endeavor — it takes seven weeks to get new workers trained, although the program is fully paid.

To tackle the issue, the service raised its starting pay by \$4 an hour in October, to \$21.36, but the hike made little difference, York said. A \$2,500 bonus it began offering at the end of November has proved more effective, increasing applications fivefold over the course of the first week.

York said the agency didn't fully understand all the causes of the labor issues but knew it was part of a broader movement by some workers away from customer-facing work.

Elsewhere, public transportation service has been impacted due to labor issues in Los Angeles, Seattle, Austin, Houston, New York City, New Jersey and the D.C. area, where some bus systems are down by 10 percent or more in staffing. Riders in Philadelphia and Chicago have made similar complaints.

In states such as Utah, Colorado and Ohio, transportation officials are having trouble finding enough workers to clear the roads after snowstorms. Amtrak has been bracing for potential service cuts, if a substantial number of its employees refuse to be vaccinated against the coronavirus by the company's Jan. 4 deadline.

And the surge of cases from the omicron variant could further exacerbate the issue.

Patrick Coomer, 61, a bus operator in Portland for the past nine years, said in an interview that bus-driving jobs had always been high pressure but have only grown more stressful since the pandemic.

Coomer says customers, including some emotionally disturbed people, constantly challenge him about the system's mask mandate. Attacks on operators remain a persistent threat, too, he said.

Coomer has had to quarantine at home three times in the past year after developing covid-like symptoms, but has not contracted the virus yet. The labor shortages mean that some bus routes are more crowded with riders than ever.

"It's often only standing room at rush hour, which makes me nervous having to deal with people who don't want to wear masks during a pandemic, not knowing who's been vaccinated and who hasn't," he said. "There's also frustration from riders who think you're late, but you're right on time, if maybe the bus ... ahead of me got canceled. We're always faced with challenges, and now we're facing new ones."

The Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757, which represents drivers like Coomer, said there are about two people leaving the workforce for every one person getting hired recently. Coomer says he personally knows about 10 people who have left, about half moving into early retirement and another half to take new jobs, like a younger co-worker who left to drive for FedEx, who he says has told him she's much happier now that she doesn't have to deal with angry riders.

"She doesn't have people breathing down her neck, people complaining, sending in false or misleading complaints about her," he said. "She's doing really well and I'm happy for her."

Coomer says he'd love to retire but keeps working because he is the main income earner in his house.

Bill Bradley, an official at ATU Local 757, said operator jobs have grown less desirable in recent decades. Many job benefits, such as pension payments, retiree medical benefits and apprenticeship programs, were cut back in the austerity following the Great Recession.

Meanwhile, wages from many private industries have caught up and often surpass those offered by TriMet, he said. Unpredictable or irregular schedules in a 24/7 transit operation have always been a drawback, he said, but the toxic public sphere has pushed even more people away. So people are jumping ship to go work at delivery companies or take other commercial driving jobs, like log or cement truck driving.

“I’ve seen management talk about how the next generation, millennials, how they job hop,” he said. “Well, there’s nothing keeping them at jobs. There’s no reason to stay. You drop out because that’s how you grow your wages now — there’s no other benefits that come with staying longer. It became a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

In New York, officials from the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which runs the nation’s largest public transit system, have gotten so desperate for workers that they sent letters to about 700 retired subway operators, offering them \$35,000 to come out of work for three months.

The shortage has cascaded into thousands of trips being delayed or canceled, but getting new operators trained takes between six and nine months.

John Samuelson, president of the Transport Workers Union of America, said the MTA, which is controlled by the state of New York, deserved blame for the shortage after intentionally letting the agency’s staff levels drop through attrition earlier in the pandemic.

“Herein lies the freaking incredible genius of this bureaucratic mess that the MTA allowed itself to become,” he said. “They said it was nice to reduce head count to save a few pennies, but it was the ultimate penny-wise, dollar-foolish decision that they’ve ever made in their history, perhaps. ... I distinguish New York from other cities because these are self-inflicted wounds that are not just part of the overall trend about worker shortages.”

MTA chief executive Janno Lieber, who took over in July, has confirmed that the organization shed some 3,300 jobs earlier in the pandemic by eliminating positions with vacancies. The MTA said in a statement that it was “exhausting every avenue to quickly increase the number of available train crews.”

Across the river, New Jersey Transit is offering bonuses between \$3,000 and \$6,000 for bus operators.

Houston’s metro transit agency has also been hit by the double-barrel blast of high attrition and recruiting challenges.

To help close a gap of about 100 operators, it has begun offering bus and rail operators signing bonuses of \$4,000 and mechanics bonuses of \$8,000.

The agency is also in the process of approving a wage increase for drivers, spokeswoman Tracy Jackson said. Some service was cut in the early days of the pandemic, Jackson said, but the agency hasn’t had to make any additional cuts because of the shortage. Daily ridership, at about 160,000, remains less than 60 percent of its former level.

“Hiring slowed at the peak of the pandemic for obvious reasons, when state and local governments put in place stay-home orders,” Jackson said. “And that, combined with attrition, which is always part of the equation, is the reason we’re working to bring more operators on board now.”

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HEADLINE	12/28 Omicron severity: older, at-risk populations?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/12/28/omicron-how-severe-us/
GIST	<p>Healthy individuals who have been vaccinated, and especially those who have been boosted, appear unlikely to develop severe infections from the omicron variant that would land them in the hospital, say medical experts who have monitored the effects of the newest coronavirus variant since it was identified over four weeks ago.</p> <p>While omicron has sent U.S. infections soaring to levels not seen since last winter’s wave, it appears to have less severe effects than the delta variant, according to a handful of international studies and early data from several U.S. hospitals.</p>

Those infected by the omicron variant are [15 to 20 percent less likely to go to an emergency room](#), and 40 percent less likely to be hospitalized overnight, compared with those infected with delta, according to English data analyzed by scientists from Imperial College London. That aligns with early U.S. data from some hospitals.

At the Houston Methodist hospital system, about 15 percent of symptomatic individuals have ended up hospitalized — around a 70 percent reduction compared with those infected by the delta variant, said James Musser, chair of pathology and genomic medicine.

A separate [study from Britain](#), which is not yet peer reviewed, found that people infected with omicron were almost 60 percent less likely to enter the hospital than those infected with delta.

“What is absolutely clear is there is lower rate of hospitalization with our omicron patients in our hospital system,” Musser said. “That does not necessarily mean that this variant is quote-unquote ‘less virulent.’ The jury’s still out on that. What we know now is that ... if you are immunized and, more importantly, if you are boosted, you’re going to stay out of substantial trouble.”

He and other experts warn against complacency, however, cautioning that millions of Americans, particularly the unvaccinated, remain vulnerable to more serious disease from the most transmissible coronavirus variant to date.

Other factors that might lead to greater risk include an individual’s age, the type of vaccine or booster they received, and whether they have underlying health problems, such as heart disease or obesity, said Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota and a member of President Biden’s [covid-19 transition task force](#).

“Have you previously had infection? Were you vaccinated? How many doses of vaccine, and was it more than six months ago? So in some ways this is almost like a calculus problem. It’s got a lot of moving parts to it and we’re trying to figure it out,” Osterholm said.

Doctors also caution that far more people will become infected with omicron simply because of its transmissibility. If even a small fraction of those land in the hospital, they worry that health care systems that are already short-staffed because of delta infections could be overwhelmed — with potentially dire results for those needing critical care as a result of car accidents, heart attacks, strokes, or any number of things that bring people to emergency rooms.

“We need to be respectful of the fact that our hospital system has been under this kind of duress for such a long time,” said Larry Corey, a virologist at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle. “We need to do everything we can to not allow the situation, where there’s such crowding and such intensity that we can’t optimally take care of the people who get severe disease.”

Anthony S. Fauci, Biden’s chief medical adviser, said the rapid increase in the numbers of people getting infected with the omicron variant will invariably put additional strain on the system.

“We’re going to have a real challenge to the health-care delivery system — namely the number of beds, the number of ICU beds and even the number of health care providers,” Fauci said in an interview. “Even vaccinated people are getting breakthrough infections. So if you get enough nurses and doctors infected, they are going to temporarily be out of action. And if you get enough of them out of action, you could have a double stress on the health care system.”

The welcome news for most people who are vaccinated and boosted is that omicron infections often mimic the symptoms of the [common cold](#). Those with two shots of vaccine, but no booster, also appear to fare relatively well, though they may develop more intense symptoms that may last longer, experts said.

Of the [205 million](#) Americans who have been vaccinated, about 66 million, or 32 percent, have received a booster dose, [according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

In a series of [Twitter posts](#), Craig Spencer, who teaches emergency medicine at Columbia University Medical Center, said every boosted patient he has seen in the emergency room has had no difficulty breathing or shortness of breath. Those who have had two doses of either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines also have had mild symptoms, he said, “but more than those who had received a third dose.”

But almost every patient who had to be hospitalized was unvaccinated, he said.

“No matter your political affiliation, or thoughts on masks, or where you live in this country, as an ER doctor you’d trust with your life if you rolled into my emergency room at 3am, I promise you that you’d rather face the oncoming Omicron wave vaccinated,” Spencer wrote.

[Children are also filling up hospital beds](#) in many parts of the country, especially in New York. State officials issued a warning on Christmas Eve [after a fourfold increase in hospitalizations](#) in children under 18 in New York City between Dec. 5 and last week. About half of the admissions were children under 5, who are not eligible for vaccination, according to the New York Department of Health.

Experts cautioned that those at higher risk of severe infection to previous variants probably remain vulnerable to this one.

It’s not yet clear whether older, boosted individuals and those with underlying conditions, such as diabetes and heart disease, face the same lowered risk with omicron. Answering such questions is key to assessing the likely trajectory of the variant in the U.S. since it is older and less healthy than many of its global peers.

So far, though, early U.S. data echoes what has been seen in South Africa and Britain, where omicron waves are slightly ahead of this country’s.

A group of Scottish scientists said recently that vaccinated people appear to have some protection against symptomatic infection from omicron, although less than they did against delta. A third dose or booster of an mRNA vaccine was associated with a 57 percent reduction in the odds of developing a symptomatic omicron case.

In the Johns Hopkins Hospital emergency department, physicians are seeing more infections than at any other point in the pandemic, but most of the cases are not severe, said Stuart Ray, a professor of medicine in the division of infectious diseases. But he warned that there is not yet “reassuring evidence” the United States will be spared from a disruptive wave of infections and complications.

The country faces other challenges with omicron in terms of its medicine cabinet. Two of the three existing intravenous treatments called monoclonal antibodies — those from Regeneron and Eli Lilly — do not work against the variant. Some Republican governors had touted the ability of those with covid-19 to receive monoclonal antibodies, spurring some Americans to see those treatments as an alternative to getting vaccinated.

The only monoclonal antibody that does work, [sotrovimab from Vir Biotechnology and GlaxoSmithKline](#), is in short supply and will not be available to many of those who become infected. The Food and Drug Administration authorized two easy-to-take [antiviral pills](#) last week and one has high efficacy against omicron, but it will be in initial short supply. Distribution of the pills is expected to begin shortly.

It is also unclear whether the surge in the United States will follow the same pattern as South Africa’s, which rapidly passed the peak of omicron cases last week.

South Africa’s population is significantly younger and has far lower vaccination rates, with about 35 percent of the population immunized, and virtually no one boosted. The country also grappled with a delta variant wave that infected a far greater portion of the population than it did in the United States.

	<p>The significant number of South African residents infected with delta compared with the United States could prove to be an important distinction that might make more Americans vulnerable to omicron, said Chris Beyrer, an epidemiologist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.</p> <p>Beyrer also noted that infections in the United States, Britain and Germany seemed to be increasing at a significantly faster rate than they were in South Africa.</p> <p>“This is an incredibly infectious virus and it is moving right along,” Beyrer said. He added that the United States has numerous tools — including ready access to vaccines and booster shots, the new antiviral medicines, testing and masking — that could help curb its effects.</p> <p>But referring to those who have refused to follow public health guidelines, Beyrer said, “We have a lot of resistance so that makes us vulnerable to infection.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Seattle mayor round-the-clock security
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/amid-threats-and-a-police-shortage-seattle-mayor-jenny-durkan-had-round-the-clock-security-detail/
GIST	<p>For the last year of Mayor Jenny Durkan’s term, the Seattle Police Department has staffed a security detail outside her home for 24 hours a day.</p> <p>Durkan has faced continuous threats with no modern precedent for a Seattle mayor, according to SPD, and the department’s assessment of her security began to change in late June of 2020. That was when demonstrators first marched to her home and made public her address, which is protected under a state confidentiality program because of threats against her while she was a U.S. attorney.</p> <p>Durkan said in an interview that she takes threats seriously, pointing to her friendship with Thomas Wales, a federal prosecutor who was shot to death at home in 2001, and her acquaintance with Esther Salas, a federal judge in New Jersey whose son was killed on her doorstep by someone looking for Salas.</p> <p>“Those impacts on a family are real, which is why it was so important to me to have that protection,” she said. Citing the first protest that brought people to her home, she said, “Now when I get death threats from people, I don’t have the security of knowing they can’t find my family.”</p> <p>Police did not say precisely when the mayor’s home detail began, but officers assigned to it logged at least 2,964 hours — 60% of them overtime — for a cost of nearly \$230,000 from October of 2020 through early August, according to records reviewed by The Seattle Times.</p> <p>The department said it has generally fielded two officers a day — drawn from the North Precinct and the Collaborative Policing Bureau — to safeguard the mayor’s residence.</p> <p>Randall Huserik, a Seattle Police Department spokesperson, said Durkan’s safety “would not have been an issue” had her address not become public. He said, “We are not aware of a mayor that has had continuous threats” like Durkan, whose security risk was compounded by having served as the region’s top federal prosecutor.</p> <p>Durkan, whose salary was about \$230,000 in 2020, donated her pay back to the city beginning in late May through the end of last year, according to a Durkan spokesperson and Glen Lee, the city’s finance director. She said at the time it was to help the city cut costs amid a revenue shortfall.</p> <p>Mayors of other large cities, such as New York and Boston, have long had 24-hour police details, but until now that hasn’t been the norm in Seattle. Past mayors may have had round-the-clock protection for brief periods, but most security details generally have accompanied a mayor at work or to and from events, said a former senior Seattle police official.</p>

“We kind of assessed it from time to time on a case-by-case basis,” said the official, who declined to speak publicly on security practices that may have changed.

Durkan isn’t the only elected official whose home has been a target of protesters. Council members Alex Pedersen and Debora Juarez were [visited by demonstrators](#) last year who tagged their property with insults after they declined to sign on to a push, supported by other council members, to cut SPD’s budget by 50%.

“It does have a chilling effect,” Juarez said of receiving such threats. “Nobody should have to weigh violence to themselves or their family when they make the decision to be a public servant.”

Durkan has received more than two dozen graphic, derogatory messages and death wishes over the last year and a half, according to a review of social media posts and emails provided by the mayor’s office. They are among thousands of hateful emails that Durkan received, according to spokesperson Stephanie Formas, who added that the mayor personally paid to have graffiti cleaned up at her home.

The mayor has received at least five separate death threats since 2017, according to court records and voice and email messages provided by her staff. Three people have been prosecuted.

Formas said there have been additional threats against the mayor and her family that are being investigated.

A turning point came when protesters marched to Durkan’s home in June 2020 and returned there on later dates, leaving graffiti that read “Guillotine Jenny” and “Resign Bitch,” according to the mayor’s office. Durkan has [blamed](#) Councilmember Kshama Sawant for leading the march and compromising her safety.

Sawant, who [survived a recall election](#) this month that was [based in part on her participation](#) in the protest, didn’t respond to requests for comment. She has disputed the accusation that she knew the mayor’s address or led the march.

As Durkan dealt with personal safety concerns in the summer of 2020, she clashed with the City Council over its push to cut SPD’s funding by 50%, blaming council members for an exodus of officers that included former Chief Carmen Best.

“We need alternatives to armed police responses, and we have significantly ramped up these alternatives,” Durkan [said this fall](#). “But when someone calls 911 with a dangerous, potentially life-threatening emergency — we need enough police officers to respond.”

Durkan said she publicly took this position before SPD began providing security at her home and that her views were informed by years of working in and around law enforcement.

Seattle police declared a staffing crisis after a historically high number of officers left the department in 2020. The [time it took officers to respond to 911 calls jumped](#) that summer, with SPD attributing it to staffing and critics charging that it stemmed from an overly aggressive approach to policing demonstrations.

“While there is a staffing challenge, we cannot have the mayor [be] a victim of multiple threats and subjected to potential harm,” Huserik, the department spokesman, said in an email.

Just 20 days after Durkan was elected in 2017, a man in Canada left a voice message at the U.S. Attorney’s Office for Western Washington threatening to kill her, court records show. The man previously had been charged by the office for threatening to kill a prosecutor and was ultimately found not competent to stand trial.

He was arrested in May 2018 after crossing the border into Washington, where he was found with handcuffs and a fake FBI badge. He was again found not competent to stand trial.

	<p>In February, Durkan obtained a protective order against a woman who repeatedly visited her house and allegedly threatened her life on Christmas Eve in 2020. The woman returned to the mayor's home and tossed a bag of papers onto her property in August, and she was charged in Seattle Municipal Court with violating the court order and trespassing.</p> <p>A police report says the papers contained "no threatening notes." An attorney for the woman claims she was exercising free speech and is seeking the dismissal of the charge for violating the order.</p> <p>In April, a man with a lengthy history of mental illness and criminal convictions left the mayor a voice message, saying, "I'm going to kill you and going to kill your whole family," according to charging documents.</p> <p>The man pleaded guilty in mental health court, court records show. Durkan wrote a letter to the judge supporting the man's participation in the court-supervised mental health program.</p> <p>Durkan said the continuous threats contributed to her decision not to run for reelection.</p> <p>"It was hugely impactful on me and my family," she said. "For me, the real question is how do we stop that tide," referring to the rise in threats against elected officials nationally. "People will quit wanting to serve if they can't protect their families."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Seattle home-price growth flat but still high
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/real-estate/home-price-growth-is-slowing-across-the-united-states-heres-whats-happening-in-seattle/
GIST	<p>After a red-hot summer, Seattle-area home prices were roughly flat for the third straight month in October, continuing the recent slowdown in the local housing market that could last at least through the colder months.</p> <p>Still, that doesn't mean homes are becoming more affordable.</p> <p>Home prices in the Seattle area rose seventh-fastest in the country in October, behind Phoenix, Tampa, Miami, Las Vegas, Dallas and San Diego, according to the latest S&P CoreLogic Case-Shiller Home Price Index, released Tuesday. The index lags by two months and monitors a three-month rolling average of home prices in parts of King, Snohomish and Pierce counties.</p> <p>"The slowing of home prices is most notable in colder and more expensive areas, as well as middle-tier priced homes where homebuyers may have less wiggle room in their budgets," CoreLogic Deputy Chief Economist Selma Hepp said in a statement.</p> <p>More affordable homes "are still in higher demand as entry-level buyers and investors continue to compete for the very limited supply," Hepp said.</p> <p>Home price growth is slowing down nationwide. Prices were up 19.1% nationally in October from a year earlier, slightly lower than the 19.7% jump the previous month. Fourteen of the 20 cities Case-Shiller tracks saw a similar trend, with price growth slowing down from the previous month in October.</p> <p>The recent stagnation is typical in the fall and winter months, but still marks a sharp shift from the summer, when Seattle reported its highest-ever year-to-year price jumps. Home prices in the Seattle area ticked up 0.6% from September to October, which was slightly higher than 0.4% the previous month but still far below the 3% to 5% monthly jumps this spring, according to the index.</p> <p>Zoom out, and the price jumps are still staggering. Seattle-area home prices are up 22.8% from October 2020, according to the index. That's lower than the record-high spikes this summer, but a bigger year-to-year jump than at any point in 2020 or in the runup to the Great Recession.</p>

Housing prices have climbed since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, driven by competition among buyers and ultra-low interest rates. Nationally, prices have outpaced the pre-recession peak in 2006 by 48.3%, according to the Case-Shiller index.

More competition is likely to return in the Seattle area in the spring, typically the market's busiest season. The big question for would-be homebuyers is whether the spring will be as frenzied as the last two years, with frequent bidding wars, all-cash offers and price growth that felt out of control.

A bigger supply of homes for sale or an increase in interest rates could ease competition. Even so, some buyers will simply be priced out of buying a home entirely.

Last month, the median King County home sold for \$820,000, according to separate data [released by the Northwest Multiple Listing Service](#). In Seattle, the median home sold for \$850,000.

Zillow Senior Economist Kwame Donaldson predicts that growth in prices will continue to slow this winter, but prices will stay high because of a combination of low unemployment, few homes for sale and a wave of millennials trying to become homeowners.

Hepp said Tuesday's data suggests prices will continue to rise next year, though not as dramatically as in 2021.

"Unfortunately, the rate of home price growth will be limiting for many young buyers who have yet to accumulate sufficient equity gains, and an expected increase in mortgage rates next year will present further challenges," Hepp said.

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HEADLINE	12/28 Pain at gas pump to get worse before better
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/28/business/gas-prices-inflation/index.html
GIST	<p>New York (CNN Business)Pain at the pump will get worse before it gets better.</p> <p>That's according to a new GasBuddy forecast that predicts the national average will rise to \$3.41 a gallon in 2022, up from \$3.02 a gallon this year.</p> <p>That would reverse some of the recent relief American drivers have received as gas prices have slowly backed away from seven-year highs.</p> <p>The GasBuddy forecast, shared exclusively with CNN, projects prices at the pump will peak nationally at a monthly average of \$3.79 in May, before finally retreating below current levels by late 2022.</p> <p>"We could see a national average that flirts with, or in a worst-case scenario, potentially exceeds \$4 a gallon," said Patrick De Haan, head of petroleum analysis at GasBuddy, an app that tracks fuel prices, demand and outages.</p> <p>That would amplify the inflationary pressures hitting American families grappling with the biggest price spikes in nearly 40 years. And it would add to the White House's political headaches.</p> <p>The national average at the pump fell to \$3.29 a gallon on Monday, according to AAA. That's down by 13 cents from the peak of \$3.42 on November 8.</p> <p>The call for gas prices to rise further in the coming months stands in contrast with forecasts from the government and some, though not all, on Wall Street.</p>

The US Energy Information Administration said on December 7 the national average will likely drop to \$3.01 a gallon in January and [fall to \\$2.88 for 2022](#). Citigroup likewise predicted a "radical drop" in energy prices, including a potential bear market for oil next year.

'The economy is hot.'

GasBuddy is basing its forecast on several major themes, including demand that continues to recover from Covid much faster than supply.

"The economy is hot. Demand has come roaring back. But supply is still catching up after getting cut greatly in 2020," De Haan said.

OPEC and its allies enacted unprecedented production cuts in the spring of 2020 after oil prices crashed below zero for the first time ever. US oil companies also slashed output.

Despite high prices, neither OPEC+ nor US oil producers have gotten back to pre-Covid production.

Refinery shutdowns are a problem, too

The other major factor is that key refineries have been sidelined in recent years.

Low prices when Covid erupted [forced the closure of some refineries](#), which churn out gasoline, jet fuel and diesel that the economy relies on.

Another refinery in Louisiana was [damaged by Hurricane Ida](#) in August, prompting Phillips 66 to [convert the facility into an oil terminal instead](#).

And then last week one of America's largest refineries, the ExxonMobil plant in Baytown, Texas, was [rocked by an explosion](#) that injured at least four workers.

Tom Kloza, chief oil analyst for the Oil Price Information Service, previously told CNN the [Baytown refinery accident could weigh on already-constrained gasoline supply](#). Kloza said he would not be surprised to see average prices rise to \$4 a gallon in much of the country this spring and summer.

Refinery capacity fell to a six-year low in 2021, according to the EIA. De Haan, the GasBuddy analyst, said the demise of multiple refineries has contributed to the higher price outlook.

"There is less breathing room as a result of those refinery shutdowns," he said.

'Anything could change'

The good news is GasBuddy does not anticipate the spring surge in gas prices will last.

The forecast calls for gas prices to stay elevated at \$3.78 a gallon in June and \$3.57 in July but then falling sharply as demand cools off. By December, GasBuddy expects gas prices will average \$3.01 a gallon nationally, which is below current levels.

Of course, no one can say with certainty where gas prices will go next. Covid has made it very difficult to accurately forecast much about today's economy.

Although GasBuddy's prior forecasts were reasonably close to where prices ended up, the company did not see the 2021 surge coming.

De Haan concedes there is a lot of uncertainty today, especially on the Covid front.

"Anything could change," he said. "Tomorrow there could be a ridiculous variant and prices could plummet."

HEADLINE	12/28 Pediatric cases, hospitalizations 'on fire'
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/pediatric-covid-19-case-rates-hospitalizations-fire-amid/story?id=81955322
GIST	<p>With coronavirus cases in the U.S. approaching near-peak levels recorded last winter, pediatric coronavirus infection and hospitalization levels are now surging to their highest point in months.</p> <p>Last week, nearly 200,000 American children tested positive for COVID-19, up by about 50% since the beginning of December, according to a new report from the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Children's Hospital Association. Hospitalizations among children have been rapidly following suit.</p> <p>Across the country, more than 2,100 children are currently hospitalized with confirmed or suspected cases of COVID-19 -- up by approximately 800 pediatric patients, compared to just a month ago, according to federal data.</p> <p>As a growing number of COVID-19 positive children are admitted into the hospital in need of care, health care workers and experts are sounding the alarm about the concerning trend.</p> <p>"Our most precious commodity in this United States of America is our children," Dr. Kenneth Remy, associate professor of internal medicine and pediatrics critical care with UH Rainbow Babies & Children's Hospital, told ABC News. "And right now, we're on fire."</p> <p>Daily pediatric COVID-19 related hospital admissions have more than doubled in the last month, increasing by 110%. Now, an average of more than 300 children are being admitted to the hospital each day.</p> <p>According to the health experts, a confluence of factors have led to the surge. The initial catalyst was the delta variant, subsequently followed by the recently discovered omicron variant. Further, vaccination rates, particularly among the pediatric population, continue to lag, leaving many children vulnerable to severe illness.</p> <p>To date, less than a third of eligible children -- ages 5 to 17 -- have been fully vaccinated.</p> <p>6 states report more than 100 children hospitalized with COVID-19</p> <p>At the state level, more children are hospitalized with COVID-19 in New York than in any other state in the country, particularly in New York City, where children appear to be bearing the brunt of the state's latest surge in pediatric cases.</p> <p>In less than three weeks, New York City has seen a five-fold increase since the week of Dec. 5, Mary Bassett, the state health commissioner, reported during an update with Gov. Kathy Hochul on Monday.</p> <p>"There's just no reason. We have the supply. We have the capacity. We have the staff in place for every child to be vaccinated, who is eligible," Hochul said, urging parents to use the winter break as a time to vaccinate their children.</p> <p>Six states -- Georgia, Illinois, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas -- currently have more than 100 children hospitalized with COVID-19.</p> <p>In Pennsylvania, the PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia warned last week that it has seen a "sharp increase in test positivity" among children it has tested in the area.</p> <p>"These data support the fact that transmission is now increasing disproportionately among children compared to adults," the group wrote. "We are seeing cases of moderate to severe disease among hospitalized children, including otherwise healthy children, particularly those who have not been vaccinated."</p>

In Ohio, where more than 200 children are currently hospitalized with COVID-19, Dr. Adam Mezoff, chief medical officer at Dayton Children's Hospital, told ABC News that he has been concerned to see the recent increase in infected children.

"It seems to be hitting younger age groups, at this time," Mezoff said, adding that he expects to see more hospitalizations to follow, given the infectivity of omicron. "How sick they become is hard to estimate right now, because we don't have enough information."

Preliminary data from South Africa estimates that children had a 20% higher risk of hospitalization in the country's omicron-driven fourth wave, given the fact that so many children were still unvaccinated, and therefore, unprotected.

"We have to keep an eye on that," Dr. Anthony Fauci, chief medical adviser to the White House, told ABC's "Good Morning America" on Monday. "That's one of the reasons why we say now that we have the capability and the authority to vaccinate children 5 to 11, that we're encouraging parents, that if you have a child from 5 to 11, please get that child vaccinated to prevent them from getting anything that even resembles a serious illness."

Although severe illness due to COVID-19 remains "uncommon" among children, according to the AAP and CHA, experts stress that young people are not immune from the virus, or from severe illness and death.

According to the CDC, children are as likely to be infected with COVID-19 as adults and the virus is now one of the top 10 causes of death for children ages 5 through 11 years.

In Northeast Ohio, Remy said that what is happening in his hospital "is a reflection" of what is happening in the rest of the country for children, further rebutting the misconception that children are unaffected by COVID-19.

"What we've seen over the past couple of weeks, sadly, is not even just a slow increase, but a direct shoot upward [trend] of children becoming ill from this disease, and coming into the ICU," Remy said. "Sadly, we've seen children at our institution and others, lose their lives. So we're in a different situation than we were many months ago."

Mezoff said he worries that there will be a lot of sick children, and he is also deeply concerned that there will not be enough staff to take care of them.

"The combination of large numbers of children that are sick with challenging staffing numbers does raise a lot of concern for us," Mezoff said.

Remy added that he and his colleagues fear that more people, including children, will be coming into the hospital in the next few weeks into the intensive care units.

"We're not just arcing upward. We are going straight upward," Remy said. "And suddenly over the next couple of weeks, this is going to get worse, and so sadly, too many people are going to lose their lives."

'This is a no brainer'

As the virus continues to spread, experts stress that vaccination remains the best tool to not only protect children from getting sick, but also to change the trajectory of the pandemic.

"If I knew that there was a fire outside my house, I would make sure that I had extinguishers. I would make sure that I had a way out and an escape plan for my children," said Remy, using, once more, his blaze metaphor to explain the current crisis of the unfolding pandemic. "Right now ... being on fire, we have something that could actually quench much of those flames."

	<p>Mezoff noted that as of yet, Dayton's Children's Hospital has yet to care for a COVID-19 positive child who has been vaccinated.</p> <p>Getting boosted when eligible and wearing masks also remain key to protect those who are still too young to be vaccinated, Remy said.</p> <p>"We know that these things will quell those flames and protect our children. So to me, this is a no brainer," Remy said. "We only have one goal we've only had one goal and that's to improve the lives of children. That means keeping them alive."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Move to shorten isolation stirs confusion
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/us-move-shorten-covid-19-isolation-stirs-confusion-81973841
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON -- U.S. health officials' decision to shorten the recommended COVID-19 isolation and quarantine period from 10 days to five is drawing criticism from some medical experts and could create more confusion and fear among Americans.</p> <p>To the dismay of some authorities, the new guidelines allow people to leave isolation without getting tested to see if they are still infectious.</p> <p>The guidance has raised questions about how it was crafted and why it was changed now, in the middle of another wintertime spike in cases, this one driven largely by the highly contagious omicron variant.</p> <p>Monday's action by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cut in half the recommended isolation time for Americans who are infected with the coronavirus but have no symptoms. The CDC similarly shortened the amount of time people who have come into close contact with an infected person need to quarantine.</p> <p>The CDC has been under pressure from the public and the private sector, including the airline industry, to shorten the isolation time and reduce the risk of severe staffing shortages amid the omicron surge. Thousands of flights have been canceled over the past few days in a mess blamed on omicron.</p> <p>"Not all of those cases are going to be severe. In fact, many are going to be asymptomatic," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said Monday. "We want to make sure there is a mechanism by which we can safely continue to keep society functioning while following the science."</p> <p>CDC officials said the guidance is in keeping with growing evidence that people with the virus are most infectious in the first few days.</p> <p>Louis Mansky, director of the Institute for Molecular Virology at the University of Minnesota, agreed there is a scientific basis to the CDC's recommendations.</p> <p>"When somebody gets infected, when are they most likely to transmit the virus to another person?" he said. "It's usually in the earlier course of the illness, which is typically a day or two before they actually develop symptoms and then a couple of days to three days after that."</p> <p>Research, including a study published in the journal JAMA Internal Medicine in August, backs that up, though medical experts cautioned that nearly all of the data predates omicron.</p> <p>The CDC released a report Tuesday on a cluster of six omicron cases in a Nebraska household and found the median incubation period — the time between exposure and the appearance of symptoms — was about three days, versus the five days or more documented earlier in the pandemic. The six people also experienced relatively mild illness.</p> <p>But other experts questioned why the CDC guidelines allow people to leave isolation without testing.</p>

“It’s frankly reckless to proceed like this,” said Dr. Eric Topol, founder and director of the Scripps Research Translational Institute. “Using a rapid test or some type of test to validate that the person isn’t infectious is vital.”

“There’s no evidence, no data to support this,” he added.

Mansky said CDC probably didn’t include exit testing in its guidelines for logistical reasons: There is a run on COVID-19 rapid tests amid the spike in cases and the busy holiday travel season. In many places, at-home tests are difficult or impossible to find.

The CDC is “driven by the science, but they also have to be cognizant of the fact of, you know, what are they going to tell the public that they’ll do,” Mansky said. “That would undermine CDC if they had guidance that everybody was ignoring.”

Qamara Edwards, director of business and events for Sojourn Philly, which owns four restaurants in Philadelphia, said about 15% of its employees are out sick with COVID-19, and staffing is tight.

The CDC changes are “great for businesses, they do allow people to return to work sooner than they’ve expected,” Edwards said, though she understands why workers might be resistant and worried about their safety.

In Los Angeles, King Holder, who runs the StretchLab Beverly fitness business, likewise said omicron has caused “ample disruption” to his company, and he welcomed the more relaxed guidelines.

“The possibility of five days compared to 10-14 days is huge for our business and allows us to stay afloat,” he said.

But Dana Martin, a 38-year-old Philadelphia teacher and educational consultant, said: “The looser COVID guidelines make me nervous. I’m more hesitant to participate in holiday activities because of the omicron variant and the seemingly more lax protocols.”

Marshall Hatch, senior pastor of New Mount Pilgrim Church on Chicago’s West Side, said he is bracing for some confusion in his congregation. The church has been a strong advocate for testing, vaccinations and booster shots.

Hatch said the CDC’s latest guidance is confusing and “a little incongruous.”

“Either we’re in a surge that we need to take very seriously or are we winding down the pandemic and that’s why we’re shortening the isolation and quarantine times,” he said Tuesday. “They might want to give us a little more information to go with.”

Hatch said some members of the largely Black congregation, particularly senior citizens, are skeptical of information from government.

The CDC move follows global efforts to adjust isolation rules, with policies differing from country to country.

England last week trimmed its self-isolation period for vaccinated people who have tested positive for COVID-19 to seven days in many cases, provided two negative lateral flow tests are taken a day apart.

The French government said Monday that it will soon relax its isolation rules, although by exactly how much isn’t yet clear.

Health Minister Olivier Veran said the rule changes will be aimed at warding off “paralysis” of public and private services. By some estimates, France could be registering more than 250,000 new infections per day by January.

Italy, meanwhile, is considering doing away with a quarantine altogether for those who have had close contact with an infected person as long they have had a booster shot. Projections indicate as many as 2 million Italians could be put in quarantine over the next two weeks as the virus spreads.

The U.S. airline industry applauded the CDC move.

“The decision is the right one based upon science,” said the lobbying group Airlines for America.

But the head of a flight attendants union criticized the change, saying it could lead businesses to pressure sick employees to come back before they are well.

If that happens, “we will make clear it is an unsafe work environment, which will cause a much greater disruption than any ‘staffing shortages,’” warned Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA International.

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HEADLINE	12/28 Calif. tops 5M cases amid surge in omicron
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/california-1st-state-top-5m-cases-amid-omicron-81974344
GIST	<p>SACRAMENTO, Calif. -- California became the first state to record more than 5 million known coronavirus infections, according to the state dashboard Tuesday, which was delayed by the holiday weekend.</p> <p>The grim milestone, as reported by the California Department of Public Health, wasn’t entirely unexpected in a state with 40 million residents poised for a surge in new infections amid holiday parties and family gatherings forced indoors by a series of winter storms.</p> <p>The first coronavirus case in California was confirmed Jan. 25, 2020. It took 292 days to get to 1 million infections on Nov. 11 of that year, and 44 days from then to top 2 million.</p> <p>California’s caseload is also ahead of other large states. Texas had more than 4.4 million and Florida topped 3.9 million as of Sunday.</p> <p>California has recorded more than 75,500 deaths related to COVID-19.</p> <p>The state has fared far better than many other states that are dealing with a coronavirus surge, with areas in the Midwest and Northeast seeing the biggest jump in cases and hospitalizations amid frigid temperatures that have kept people indoors.</p> <p>The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lists California as a place with “high” transmission of the virus, along with nearly everywhere else in the country. But in the last week California averaged 16.4 new cases per 100,000 people, less than a third of the national rate.</p> <p>Meanwhile, coronavirus related hospitalizations have been rising slowly in California, up about 12% in the last 7 days to 4,401. That’s less than half as many as during the late summer peak and one-fifth of a year ago, before vaccines were widely available.</p> <p>On Tuesday, San Francisco announced it was canceling its New Year's Eve fireworks show because of the rising caseload, while Contra Costa County in the Bay Area announced that it would require masks to be worn in all public indoor places as of Wednesday. Previously, some vaccinated people had been allowed to remove them.</p>

The timeline of COVID-19 in America often comes back to California. It had some of the earliest known cases among travelers from China, where the outbreak began.

The Feb. 6, 2020, death of a San Jose woman was the first known coronavirus fatality in the U.S. That same month, California recorded the first U.S. case not related to travel and the first infection spread within the community.

On March 19, 2020, Gov. Gavin Newsom issued the nation's first statewide stay-at-home order, shuttering businesses and schools to try to prevent hospital overcrowding.

It is unclear how many of the newly reported cases were attributed to the omicron coronavirus variant. Much about omicron remains unknown, including whether it causes more or less severe illness.

Scientists say omicron spreads even easier than other coronavirus strains, including delta, and it is expected to become dominant in the U.S. by early next year. Early studies suggest the vaccinated will need a booster shot for the best chance at preventing an omicron infection but even without the extra dose, vaccination still should offer strong protection against severe illness and death.

With cases surging, the nation's largest state-based health insurance marketplace urged more than 1.1 million uninsured Californians to sign up by Friday for subsidized coverage that would then start with the new year.

Covered California said the average cost of an intensive care coronavirus hospitalization is \$127,000, but estimated that 85% of those eligible for the state-brokered health insurance can get coverage free of charge, with government assistance.

Those who sign up after Friday will have their coverage start on Feb. 1.

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HEADLINE	12/29 Australia cases surge amid omicron spread
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/coronavirus-cases-surge-australia-omicron-spreads-81978744
GIST	<p>SYDNEY -- Coronavirus cases surged across Australia on Wednesday as an outbreak of the omicron variant exploded, prompting Prime Minister Scott Morrison to schedule an emergency national cabinet meeting.</p> <p>The surge has already overwhelmed testing stations, prompted new vaccine mandates and caused at least one state to cut back on elective surgeries.</p> <p>New infections in Sydney and surrounding parts of New South Wales state skyrocketed to more than 11,000, up from 6,000 a day earlier. Victoria state also reported a record 3,700 cases, up by more than 1,000 from the previous record set on Tuesday.</p> <p>Morrison said the nation's leaders would meet ahead of schedule on Thursday.</p> <p>“As omicron continues to go forward we will see further pressures, but states and territories are working very closely on their plans to deal with those challenges,” Morrison told reporters.</p> <p>He said he hoped the meeting would help give a clearer definition on what constituted a close contact and which tests should be used in different circumstances as case numbers ballooned.</p> <p>Other states also reported surging numbers, with more than 1,500 new infections in Queensland, 1,400 in South Australia, 138 in the Australian Capital Territory and 55 in Tasmania. Queensland health officials said about 80% of cases were the omicron variant.</p>

Neighboring New Zealand also reported its first case of possible community exposure to omicron, when a returning traveler tested positive after leaving quarantine. However, health authorities said the traveler wasn't considered highly infectious and there was no evidence yet of any community spread.

South Australia announced it would place limits on elective surgery and mandate vaccine booster shots for frontline health care workers.

State Premier Steven Marshall said South Australia would no longer be conducting screening tests for interstate travel because it doesn't have the capacity.

"Omicron is moving too quickly," Marshall said, adding that resources needed to be focused on the "very imminent" increase in hospitalizations.

More than three-quarters of Australians are fully vaccinated, and just how deadly the latest outbreak will prove remains to be seen.

Australia has so far avoided the worst ravages of the pandemic, reporting a total of 2,200 virus deaths among its population of 26 million.

On Wednesday, New South Wales — Australia's most populous state — reported three new virus deaths and 625 hospitalizations, including 61 patients in intensive care. Victoria reported four new deaths and 397 hospitalizations, including 62 in intensive care.

Testing centers have been unable to keep up with a surge in demand.

Thousands of people across New South Wales have waited for hours this week to be tested. Some were travelers who were required to have a negative PCR test before arriving in Queensland.

But under pressure to ease that requirement, Queensland's premier said Wednesday it will accept rapid antigen tests instead of PCR tests for travelers from interstate hotspots from January 1.

The outbreak was also contributing to a shortage of blood donations and an urgent call for donors to step up.

Testing and quarantining requirements prompted by the outbreak, combined with the holiday season, were creating a "perfect storm" of cancellations, said Red Cross Lifeblood donor center network head Cath Stone.

"More than half of all appointments are not being attended, which means we need more donors to roll up their sleeves and take the place of those who can't donate," Stone said.

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HEADLINE	12/28 CDC director: omicron symptoms mild so far
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/ap-interview-cdc-chief-omicron-mild-81979101
GIST	<p>ATLANTA -- More than 40 people in the U.S. have been found to be infected with the omicron variant so far, and more than three-quarters of them had been vaccinated, the chief of the CDC said Wednesday. But she said nearly all of them were only mildly ill.</p> <p>In an interview with The Associated Press, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said the data is very limited and the agency is working on a more detailed analysis of what the new mutant form of the coronavirus might hold for the U.S.</p> <p>"What we generally know is the more mutations a variant has, the higher level you need your immunity to be. ... We want to make sure we bolster everybody's immunity. And that's really what motivated the</p>

decision to expand our guidance,” Walensky said, referencing the recent approval of boosters for all adults.

She said “the disease is mild” in almost all of the cases seen so far, with reported symptoms mainly cough, congestion and fatigue. One person was hospitalized, but no deaths have been reported, CDC officials said.

Some cases can become increasingly severe as days and weeks pass, and Walensky noted that the data is a very early, first glimpse of U.S. omicron infections. The earliest onset of symptoms of any of the first 40 or so cases was Nov. 15, according to the CDC.

The omicron variant was first identified in South Africa last month and has since been reported in 57 countries, according to the World Health Organization.

The first U.S. case was reported on Dec. 1. As of Wednesday afternoon, the CDC had recorded 43 cases in 19 states. Most were young adults. About a third of those patients had traveled internationally.

More than three-quarters of those patients had been vaccinated, and a third had boosters, Walensky said. Boosters take about two weeks to reach full effect, and some of the patients had received their most recent shot within that period, CDC officials said.

Fewer than 1% of the U.S. COVID-19 cases genetically sequenced last week were the omicron variant; the delta variant accounted for more than 99%.

Scientists are trying to better understand how easily it spreads. British officials said Wednesday that they think the omicron variant could become the dominant version of the coronavirus in the United Kingdom in as soon as a month.

The CDC has yet to make any projections on how the variant could affect the course of the pandemic in the U.S. Walensky said officials are gathering data but many factors could influence how the pandemic evolves.

“When I look to what the future holds, so much of that is definitely about the science, but it’s also about coming together as a community to do things that prevent disease in yourself and one another. And I think a lot of what our future holds depends on how we come together to do that,” she said.

The CDC is also trying to establish whether the omicron variant causes milder — or more severe — illness than other coronavirus types. The finding that nearly all of the cases so far are mild may be a reflection that this first look at U.S. omicron cases captured mainly vaccinated people, who are expected to have milder illnesses, CDC officials said.

Another key question is whether it is better at evading vaccines or the immunity people build from a bout with COVID-19.

This week, scientists in South Africa reported a small laboratory study that found antibodies created by vaccines were not as effective at preventing omicron infections as they were at stopping other versions of the coronavirus.

On Wednesday, vaccine manufacturer Pfizer said that while two doses may not be protective enough to prevent infection, lab tests showed a booster increased levels of virus-fighting antibodies by 25-fold.

Blood samples taken a month after a booster showed people harbored levels of omicron-neutralizing antibodies that were similar to amounts proven protective against earlier variants after two doses, the company said.

HEADLINE	12/28 Asia slows omicron but surge inevitable?
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/asia-omicron-bay-surge-inevitable-81981554
GIST	<p>TAIPEI, Taiwan -- Much of Asia has largely managed to keep omicron at bay even as the variant rages in other parts of the world, but the region that is home to most of the globe's population is bracing for what may be an inevitable surge.</p> <p>Strict quarantine rules for arrivals and widespread mask wearing have helped slow the spread of the highly contagious variant in Asia. Countries such as Japan, South Korea and Thailand quickly reinstated entry and quarantine restrictions in recent weeks after relaxing them in the fall.</p> <p>But cases are mounting, and experts say the next few months will be critical. Those fears have been amplified by doubts about the effectiveness of the Chinese-made vaccines used in China and much of the developing world.</p> <p>"Once the pace picks up, its upsurge would be extremely fast," said Dr. Shigeru Omi, a top medical adviser to Japan's government.</p> <p>In India, which has been getting back to normal after a devastating COVID-19 outbreak earlier this year, omicron is once again raising fears, with more than 700 cases reported in the country of nearly 1.4 billion people.</p> <p>The capital, New Delhi, banned large gatherings for Christmas and New Year's, and many other states have announced new restrictions, including curfews and vaccination requirements at stores and restaurants.</p> <p>At the crowded Chandni Chowk market in New Delhi, many people were shopping without masks this week. Cycle rickshaw driver Mahesh Kumar said he is afraid of passengers who don't wear masks.</p> <p>"There are many people who don't believe in this disease. They think it doesn't exist. But I am very scared. I have children and a family," he said. "If something happens to me, who will take care of them?"</p> <p>Australia is already dealing with multiple COVID-19 surges, with a state leader saying Wednesday that "omicron is moving too quickly." Elsewhere, Thailand has topped 700 cases, South Korea has more than 500 and Japan, over 300. China, which has some of the strictest virus controls in the world, has reported at least eight.</p> <p>Only four cases have been reported in the Philippines, where people flocked to shopping malls ahead of Christmas and to Mass in the biggest Roman Catholic nation in Asia. Some hospitals have even begun dismantling COVID-19 wards in a move experts say could prove to be premature.</p> <p>Japan managed to delay the spread of the new variant for about a month largely thanks to its reimposition of entry restrictions, mandatory COVID-19 tests for all arrivals and the isolation of all passengers on a flight if anyone tested positive for omicron.</p> <p>But the barrier was broken last week when the first locally transmitted cases were confirmed in the neighboring cities of Osaka and Kyoto. Experts are urging the government to prepare for an imminent wave of infections by increasing testing, speeding up booster shots and preparing more beds at hospitals.</p> <p>"We want to believe the omicron cases could be mild, but its fast-paced infections could quickly multiply the number of patients and could still overwhelm hospitals," Omi said.</p> <p>Taiwan, where wearing a face mask is near universal in major cities, has started to offer booster shots of the Moderna vaccine and is urging people get a third shot before an expected influx of people returning home for Lunar New Year at the end of January.</p>

Preliminary research has shown that booster shots of the Pfizer, AstraZeneca and Moderna vaccines offer continued, though diminished, protection against omicron.

However, a Hong Kong University study that has yet to be published found that China's widely used Sinovac vaccine does not generate enough antibodies to protect against omicron, even with a booster shot, according to a university news release. Hong Kong offers both the Sinovac and Pfizer vaccines.

Sinovac did not respond to a request for comment. Chinese officials have said their vaccines are still effective.

"Our inactivated vaccines are still rather reliable and cover a range of antigens. Therefore, they won't be completely ineffective against omicron," Zhong Nanshan, a top government doctor, said at a public forum.

Some countries that relied on the Chinese vaccines are turning to others for boosters.

Thailand, which largely used Sinovac and Sinopharm, another Chinese vaccine, is offering booster shots of AstraZeneca or Pfizer. Indonesia, where Sinovac has been the mainstay of a campaign to vaccinate its 270 million residents, is offering a Moderna booster for health care workers. The government is also planning boosters for the general population in January, though it hasn't said which vaccine.

China's attitude toward the virus, omicron or not, is to stop transmission in its tracks, and the country appears to be getting even tougher with the approach of the Beijing Winter Olympics in February.

Officials locked down the city of Xi'an, a city and administrative area of 13 million people last week, amid a delta outbreak that has infected hundreds of people. On Monday, they ordered everyone to stay at home until another citywide round of testing was completed.

Residents complained on social media about the sudden ban. Many were relying on instant noodles and other packaged food. Some worried how they would get enough food in the coming days, especially fresh vegetables.

China quarantines those arriving from abroad for weeks, depending on the province, with three weeks being the most common.

How China's zero-COVID-19 policy will play out at the Olympics is a major question. Athletes and visitors will not be allowed to leave the Olympic zones, and those attending such as officials, journalists and venue staff will be tested every day.

To contain a deadly delta-driven surge in South Korea, the government this month restored its toughest distancing rules with a four-person limit on private gatherings and a 9 p.m. curfew on restaurants.

Health experts predict it's only a matter of time before omicron comes.

"Omicron has such a high transmission rate that it's too obvious that it'll become the dominant variant in South Korea at some point," said Jaehun Jung, a professor at Gachon University College of Medicine in South Korea.

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HEADLINE	12/28 Mexico: cruise ships Covid cases can dock
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/mexico-cruise-ships-coronavirus-cases-dock-81975866
GIST	<p>MEXICO CITY -- The Mexican government said Tuesday it will allow cruise ships carrying people infected with the coronavirus to dock.</p> <p>The announcement came after two Mexican ports refused to allowed passengers ashore because their ships had coronavirus cases.</p>

	<p>The Health Department said passengers or crew who show no symptoms will be allowed to come ashore normally, while those with symptoms or a positive virus test will be quarantined or given medical care.</p> <p>The department said a cruise ship that was prevented from docking at one Pacific coast port will be allowed to dock farther north, at the port of Guaymas. That was an apparent reference to a ship that was supposed to dock at Puerto Vallarta a few days ago but was not allowed to do so.</p> <p>Early in the pandemic, some cruise ships wandered the seas for weeks seeking a port that would allow them to dock with coronavirus cases aboard.</p> <p>Mexico is one of the few countries in the world that has instituted no travel restrictions, no testing requirements and no mandatory face mask wearing for visitors. The government argues such measures would be counterproductive for the economy, for which tourism revenues account for about 8.5% of GDP.</p> <p>Mexico has also paid a high price in the pandemic. The country has had about 460,000 deaths related to COVID-19, based on government reviews of death certificates over the last two years.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/29 Hong Kong police raid news outlet; arrests
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/police-raid-pro-democracy-hong-kong-news-outlet/story?id=81982342
GIST	<p>HONG KONG -- Hong Kong's national security police arrested six people linked to Stand News, an independent online media outlet, in another sign that the city's once-thriving press freedom is taking a turn for the worse.</p> <p>Around 200 officers also raided the Stand News office, with a search warrant under the national security law, allowing them to "search and seize relevant journalistic materials."</p> <p>The arrests came about six months after the pro-democracy paper Apple Daily was forced to shut down following a newsroom raid, seizure of its assets, and arrest of its founder, Jimmy Lai.</p> <p>Those arrested on Wednesday included former Stand News board members Denise Ho, a well-known pop singer and democracy activist, and Margaret Ng, an ex-lawmaker. Ronson Chan, deputy assignment editor and Hong Kong Journalists Association chairman, was also detained.</p> <p>The arrests were made at their homes under a colonial-era law covering conspiracy to print or distribute seditious materials, police said in a statement. Chan attempted to live-stream police arriving at his door.</p> <p>"Anyone who use journalism as a disguise and a tool to carry out acts that endanger national security will be severely struck by the SAR government," said Chief Secretary John Lee.</p> <p>The HKJA in a statement posted on Facebook said it is "deeply concerned that the police have repeatedly arrested senior members of the media and searched the offices of news organizations ... HKJA urges the government to protect press freedom in accordance with the Basic Law."</p> <p>Police were seen carrying boxes out of the Stand News office.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Recall: Dole packaged salads
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/dole-salads-recalled-potential-listeria-contamination/story?id=81973913
GIST	The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is warning consumers to keep an eye on the veggies in their fridge for a potential listeria contamination.

	<p>Dole Fresh Vegetables, Inc., is voluntarily recalling from the market all Dole-branded and private label packaged salads processed at its facilities in Bessemer City, North Carolina and Yuma, Arizona, the FDA said.</p> <p>A random analysis of listeria packages of a Dole-branded garden salad from the two facilities found samples of a strain of listeria monocytogenes, the FDA said.</p> <p>"Products subject to the voluntary recall are identified by a product lot code beginning with either the letter "N" or "Y" in the upper right-hand corner of the package," the FDA said in its advisory.</p> <p>The packaging will have a "best if used by date" between Nov. 30, 2021 and Jan. 8, 2022, according to the agency.</p> <p>Listeria can cause symptoms such as "high fever, severe headache, stiffness, nausea, abdominal pain and diarrhea," and be fatal, especially for children, the elderly and the immunocompromised, the FDA said.</p> <p>More details about the recall, including a complete list of affected products is available on the FDA's website.</p> <p>Consumers can contact the Dole Consumer Response Center at 800-356-3111 with any questions about the recall.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Extreme winter storms: California to Maine
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/cross-country-storms-bring-extreme-weather-california-maine/story?id=81969753
GIST	<p>Twenty-four states, from California to Maine, are on alert for extreme cold, freezing rain, heavy snow and avalanche danger on Tuesday.</p> <p>Western storms, which brought snow to parts of California and the West are headed east, bringing an icy mix, severe weather and a tornado threat to the South and Northeast.</p> <p>A few more storms will move through the West over the next few days, bringing more heavy snow for the mountains where an avalanche warning has been issued from California to Colorado. Locally, there could be an additional 2 to 4 inches of snow.</p> <p>In southern California, 2 to 3 additional inches of rain are possible, which could cause minor flooding.</p> <p>In the Northeast, as one storm move out, another will move in, with more icy roads forecast Tuesday night into Wednesday morning.</p> <p>Blizzard conditions raged the Midwest on Monday from the Dakotas into Minnesota, where winds gusted near 50 miles per hour and almost 2 feet of snow fell.</p> <p>Between 3 to 6 inches of snow are expected in the Midwest, with up to 4 inches possible in the Northeast over the next few days.</p> <p>From Chicago to Green Bay, Wisconsin, and the Twin Cities, a winter weather advisory has been issued where a mix of freezing rain and snow is expected on Tuesday. Roads could become very slick.</p> <p>In the South, Mississippi, Alabama and Tennessee are under a threat for severe thunderstorms with damaging winds and a few tornadoes on Wednesday.</p> <p>The northern half of the country is expecting an arctic outbreak, with some of the coldest arctic air so far this season. The air will move from the northern Rockies into the Upper Midwest.</p>

Wind chills in parts of Montana and the Dakotas have dropped close to 30 to 50 degrees below zero. This air mass will move east into the western Great Lakes and the upper Midwest. The actual temperature is forecast to be well below zero for places like Minneapolis.

As the new year begins, afternoon temperatures will be well below zero in Fargo, North Dakota, and minus 2 in Minneapolis. Temperatures in Denver and Kansas City, Missouri, will also be below freezing.

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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	12/28 Log4j, again, needs patching; new bug
SOURCE	https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/application-security/log4j-again-needs-patching-as-new-bug-is-found-and-squashed
GIST	<p>Researchers at Checkmarx discovered a way to use Log4j to launch malicious code, forcing yet another round of patching for affected users.</p> <p>Patched in Log4j 2.17.1, 2.12.4, and 2.3.2 — just as security staff were completing updates to 2.17.0 — Checkmarx researchers noticed the JDBCAppender function could still dynamically load JDNI URLs. JDBCAppender outputs logs over the Java Database Connectivity API.</p> <p>Early Tuesday, Checkmarx researcher Yaniv Nizry posted a screenshot of an email confirming the vulnerability on Twitter and telling followers to stand-by for a blog post. The subject line to the email referred the Log4j remote code execution vulnerability already being patched, which many read to say the new vulnerability was also an RCE. It's not.</p> <p>"To clarify, this is an LCE (local code execution) vulnerability, not a Remote Code Execution vulnerability. The severity is much lower than Log4Shell and requires a configuration modification," he later clarified.</p> <p>Checkmarx issued a blogpost on the new bug late today. In it, Nizry argued that the newly-issued CVE-2021-44832 demonstrates how complex remediation is across the Log4j codebase.</p> <p>"The Log4j team at Apache has worked hard to add security patches to the latest Log4j version (2.17.0) to disable lookups and allow a protocols/hosts list. As you can see, using a different attack vector, it is still possible to achieve an arbitrary code execution using the default configuration," he writes.</p> <p>The Log4j CVE being released today requires a fairly obscure set of conditions to trigger, said Casey Ellis, founder and CTO at Bugcrowd. So, while it's important for people to keep an eye out for newly released CVEs for situational awareness, this CVE doesn't appear to increase the already elevated risk of compromise via Log4j.</p> <p>Ellis said the vulnerability also appears to have been discovered through the use of static code analysis tools in conjunction with manual review/exploit development. As a logging library, Ellis said Log4j is inherently flexible in terms of how data can be passed to it - each of these points of interaction is a potential vector for exploitation, and many eyes are currently scouring Log4j, so it's fairly safe to expect more of this type of vulnerability announcement over the coming weeks."</p> <p>"In the interest of staying as up-to-date as possible with Log4j - especially if the configurations required for exploiting CVE-2021-44832 - patching to 2.17.1 is a good idea," Ellis said.</p> <p>Even before this new round of patching undoes the previous round of updates, experts were already anticipating Log4j clean-up efforts would take months or years. Log4j remains one of the most ubiquitous open source projects for Java, handling much of the logging performed by any app in that language.</p>

HEADLINE	12/28 RedLine targets passwords saved browsers
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/redline-malware-shows-why-passwords-shouldnt-be-saved-in-browsers/
GIST	<p>The RedLine information-stealing malware targets popular web browsers such as Chrome, Edge, and Opera, demonstrating why storing your passwords in browsers is a bad idea.</p> <p>This malware is a commodity information-stealer that can be purchased for roughly \$200 on cyber-crime forums and be deployed without requiring much knowledge or effort.</p> <p>However, a new report by AhnLab ASEC warns that the convenience of using the auto-login feature on web browsers is becoming a substantial security problem affecting both organizations and individuals.</p> <p>In an example presented by the analysts, a remote employee lost VPN account credentials to RedLine Stealer actors who used the information to hack the company's network three months later.</p> <p>Even though the infected computer had an anti-malware solution installed, it failed to detect and remove RedLine Stealer.</p> <p>The malware targets the 'Login Data' file found on all Chromium-based web browsers and is an SQLite database where usernames and passwords are saved.</p> <p>Even when users refuse to store their credentials on the browser, the password management system will still add an entry to indicate that the particular website is "blacklisted."</p> <p>While the threat actor may not have the passwords for this "blacklisted" account, it does tell them the account exists, allowing them to perform credential stuffing or social engineering/phishing attacks.</p> <p>After collecting the stolen credentials, threat actors either use them in further attacks or attempt to monetize them by selling them on dark web marketplaces.</p> <p>An example of how widely popular RedLine has become for hackers is the rise of the '2easy' dark web marketplace, where half of all the sold data sold was stolen using this malware.</p> <p>Another recent case of RedLine distribution is a website contact form spamming campaign that uses Excel XLL files that download and install the password-stealing malware.</p> <p>It's like RedLine is everywhere right now, and the main reason behind this is its effectiveness in exploiting a widely-available security gap that modern web browsers refuse to address.</p> <p>What to do instead</p> <p>Using your web browser to store your login credentials is tempting and convenient, but doing so is risky even without malware infections.</p> <p>By doing so, a local or remote actor with access to your machine could steal all your passwords in a matter of minutes.</p> <p>Instead, it would be best to use a dedicated password manager that stores everything in an encrypted vault and requests the master password to unlock it.</p> <p>Moreover, you should configure specific rules for sensitive websites such as e-banking portals or corporate asset webpages, requiring manual credential input.</p>

	Finally, activate multi-factor authentication wherever this is available, as this additional step can save you from account take-over incidents even if your credentials have been compromised.
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HEADLINE	12/28 'Flagpro' linked to China-state hackers
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/new-flagpro-malware-linked-to-chinese-state-backed-hackers/
GIST	<p>BlackTech cyber-espionage APT (advanced persistent threat) group has been spotted targeting Japanese companies using novel malware that researchers call 'Flagpro'.</p> <p>The threat actor uses Flagpro in the initial stage of an attack for network reconnaissance, to evaluate the target's environment, and to download second-stage malware and execute it.</p> <p>Breaching corporate networks</p> <p>The infection chain begins with a phishing email crafted for the target organization, pretending to be a message from a trustworthy partner.</p> <p>The email carries a password-protected ZIP or RAR attachment that contains a Microsoft Excel file (.XLSM) laced with a malicious macro. Running this code creates an executable in the startup directory, the Flagpro.</p> <p>On its first execution, Flagpro connects to the C2 server via HTTP and sends system ID details obtained by running hardcoded OS commands.</p> <p>In response, the C2 can send back additional commands or a second-stage payload that Flagpro can execute.</p> <p>The communication between the two is encoded with Base64, and there's also a configurable time delay between connections to avoid creating a pattern of identifiable operations.</p> <p>According to a report by NTT Security, Flagpro has been deployed against Japanese firms for more than a year, since at least October 2020. The most recent sample the researchers could retrieve is from July 2021. The targeted entities are from various sectors, including defense technologies, media, and communications.</p> <p>Flagpro v2.0</p> <p>At some point in their analysis, NTT researchers noticed a new version of Flagpro, which can automatically close dialogs relevant to establishing external connections that could reveal its presence to the victim.</p> <p>"In the implementation of Flagpro v1.0, if a dialog titled "Windows セキュリティ" is displayed when Flagpro accesses to an external site, Flagpro automatically clicks OK button to close the dialog," explains the NTT Security report.</p> <p>"This handling also works when the dialog is written in Chinese or English. It indicates the targets are in Japan, Taiwan, and English-speaking countries."</p> <p>Likely a Chinese actor</p> <p>BlackTech APT is a lesser-known actor that TrendMicro researchers first spotted in the summer of 2017 and is associated with China.</p> <p>Its typical targets are in Taiwan, although it occasionally attacked companies in Japan and Hong Kong to steal technology.</p>

	<p>In February 2021, a Unit 42 report connected BlackTech to WaterBear; another cyber-espionage group believed to be backed by the Chinese government.</p> <p>As an APT, BlackTech possesses the knowledge and sophistication to adjust its tools to new reports like this one, so Flagpro will likely now be modified for stealthier deployment.</p> <p>As the NTT report concludes: “Recently, they (BlackTech) have started using other new malware called “SelfMake Loader” and “Spider RAT”. It means that they are actively developing new malware.”</p> <p>Defenders need to take note of the new indicators of compromise related to the new malware and follow all best security practices to maintain strong defenses against sophisticated threats like BlackTech.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 LastPass: credential stuffing attacks
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/lastpass-users-warned-their-master-passwords-are-compromised/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Many LastPass users report that their master passwords have been compromised after receiving email warnings that someone tried to use them to log into their accounts from unknown locations.</p> <p>The email notifications also mention that the login attempts have been blocked because they were made from unfamiliar locations worldwide.</p> <p>"Someone just used your master password to try to log in to your account from a device or location we didn't recognize," the login alerts warn.</p> <p>"LastPass blocked this attempt, but you should take a closer look. Was this you?"</p> <p>Reports of compromised LastPass master passwords are streaming in via multiple social media sites and online platforms, including Twitter, Reddit, and Hacker News (original report from Greg Sadetsky).</p> <p>LastPass says it's credential stuffing</p> <p>LogMeIn Global PR/AR Senior Director Nikolett Bacso-Albaum told BleepingComputer that "LastPass investigated recent reports of blocked login attempts and determined the activity is related to fairly common bot-related activity, in which a malicious or bad actor attempts to access user accounts (in this case, LastPass) using email addresses and passwords obtained from third-party breaches related to other unaffiliated services."</p> <p>"It's important to note that we do not have any indication that accounts were successfully accessed or that the LastPass service was otherwise compromised by an unauthorized party. We regularly monitor for this type of activity and will continue to take steps designed to ensure that LastPass, its users, and their data remain protected and secure," Bacso-Albaum added.</p> <p>However, users receiving these warnings have stated that their passwords are unique to LastPass and not used elsewhere. BleepingComputer has asked LastPass about these concerns but has not received a reply as of yet.</p> <p>While LastPass didn't share any details regarding how the threat actors behind these credential stuffing attempts, security researchers Bob Diachenko said he recently found thousands of LastPass credentials while going through Redline Stealer malware logs.</p> <p>BleepingComputer was also told by LastPass customers who received such login alerts that their emails were not in the list of login pairs harvested by RedLine Stealer found by Diachenko.</p> <p>This means that, at least in the case of some of these reports, the threat actors behind the takeover attempts used some other means to steal their targets' master passwords.</p>

	<p>Some customers have also reported changing their master passwords since they received the login warning, only to receive another alert after the password was changed.</p> <p>To make things even worse, customers who tried disabling and deleting their LastPass accounts after receiving these warnings also report [1, 2] receiving "Something went wrong: A" errors after clicking the "Delete" button.</p> <p>LastPass users are advised to enable multifactor authentication to protect their accounts even if their master password was compromised.</p> <p>Two years ago, in September 2019, LastPass fixed a security vulnerability in the password manager's Chrome extension that could have allowed threat actors to steal the credentials last used for logging into a site.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Iranian hackers behind Cox Media attack
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/iranian-hackers-behind-cox-media-group-ransomware-attack/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>The ransomware attack that crippled the IT systems and live streams of Cox radio and TV stations earlier this year was the work of Iranian hackers, The Record has learned.</p> <p>The attack has been attributed to a threat actor tracked under the codename of DEV-0270, a group linked to several intrusions against US companies this year that have ended in the deployment of ransomware.</p> <p>While the intrusion at the Cox Media Group came to light on June 3, when the attackers deployed their ransomware and encrypted some internal servers, the group had actually breached and been lurking inside the company's internal network for weeks since mid-May.</p> <p>The attack did not impact all Cox Media Group radio and TV stations but managed to cripple the ability of some stations to broadcast live streams on their sites.</p> <p>The Cox Media Group initially tried to play down the attack. Local reporters who shared details about the ransomware incident on Twitter were admonished and told to delete tweets.</p> <p>The company did, however, formally confirm the attack in October, four months later, but without mentioning any details about the Iranian hackers.</p> <p>The revelation that Iranian hackers were behind the Cox attack comes a month after the US Department of Justice charged two Iranian nationals in November on several hacking-related charges. One of them was for the hacking of a US media company, with the intention of disseminating false news via its website regarding the legality of the US 2020 Presidential election. The company was later identified as Lee Enterprises, the operator of news sites like Buffalo News, the Arizona Daily Star, and the Omaha World-Herald.</p> <p>According to a Microsoft threat intelligence report on the group, DEV-0270 has historically engaged in both intelligence collection operations and financially-motivated attacks alike, which muddies the real motivation behind the recent Cox ransomware attack.</p> <p>The tactic of deploying ransomware on the networks of large companies is a tactic that was first seen used by Iranian hackers, namely by the SamSam group, in late 2016.</p> <p>Their method of targeting large companies rather than end consumers was eventually adopted by most of the ransomware threat actor landscape and is today known as "big-game hunting."</p>

	<p>Since then, most ransomware attacks have been linked to Russian-based groups; however, in recent years, some ransomware incidents have also been linked to members of state-sponsored espionage groups based in Iran, China, and North Korea.</p> <p>These groups deployed ransomware on the networks of some of their victims as a way to monetize hacked companies that have no intelligence-collection value or as a way to hide intelligence collection under a more generic ransomware incident that wouldn't trigger a more in-depth investigation.</p> <p>Cox Media Group spokespersons did not return requests for comment about the May-June intrusion.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Riskware streaming apps in Galaxy store
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/riskware-android-streaming-apps-found-on-samsungs-galaxy-store/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Samsung's official Android app store, called the Galaxy Store, has had an infiltration of riskware apps that triggered multiple Play Protect warnings on people's devices.</p> <p>As reported first by Android Police, the malicious apps mimic ShowBox, a pirate app that went bust in 2018, after a coalition of movie studios managed to identify its operator and filed lawsuits against him.</p> <p>ShowBox and its "sibling" MovieBox enabled users to access copyright-protected movies and TV shows without paying for a membership subscription to the legitimate broadcasters.</p> <p>Scammers bet on the popularity of the pirate app, and indeed their cloned apps enjoyed a welcoming reception by the Samsung user community.</p> <p>Infringing and risky</p> <p>According to mobile security analyst "linuxct", these apps trigger a Google Play Protect warning because the apps request access to risky permissions that could allow the installation of malware on the Android device.</p> <p>If the user grants those requests, the apps are allowed to access contact lists, call logs, execute code, fetch malware payloads click on ads, and more.</p> <p>After analyzing the apps, Linuxct found ad technology that could be exploited to perform remote code execution, allowing it to be abused to execute commands on the device.</p> <p>Multiple anti-virus engines on VirusTotal detect samples of these apps as riskware, trojan, ad clicker, or generic malware.</p> <p>These clone apps were advertised as streaming apps, promising anonymous access to protected content via an integrated VPN tool.</p> <p>According to Android Police, at least some of these apps did actually offer the promised pirate functionality at some point.</p> <p>That said, from a legal perspective, Samsung should have rejected these apps for what they claim to be, even if they weren't posing any other risk.</p> <p>However, the Samsung Galaxy Store review only vets the submitted apps for malware functionality or malicious behavior, so copyright infringement isn't a consideration.</p> <p>Since these apps don't feature nasty code "out of the box", they are not treated as malicious and weren't rejected from the store.</p>

	<p>We have reached out to Samsung for a comment on these reports and we will update the post as soon as we hear back from them.</p> <p>Although the Google Play Store isn't 100% free from malware or riskware uploads, it remains the safest choice for sourcing Android apps.</p> <p>In general, pirate apps, either free or paid, pose a legal, security, and privacy risk for their users, and the projected savings/benefits aren't worth the potential consequences of using them.</p> <p>These risks are especially true when an app asks for such wide-ranging permissions that allow it to perform commands and access information it should not need to operate.</p> <p>If you installed one of the ShowBox clones via the Galaxy Store, remove them immediately and run a full scan through a mobile security tool to uproot any potential remnants.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Norway largest media firm under attack
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/cyberattack-on-one-of-norways-largest-media-companies-shuts-down-presses/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>Amedia, the largest local news publisher in Norway, announced on Tuesday that several of its central computer systems were shut down in what it is calling an apparent “serious” cyberattack.</p> <p>The attack is preventing the company from printing Wednesday’s edition of physical newspapers, and presses will continue to be halted until the issue is resolved, Amedia executive vice president of technology Pål Nedregotten said in a statement. The hack also impacts the company’s advertising and subscription systems, preventing advertisers from purchasing new ads and stopping subscribers from ordering or canceling subscriptions.</p> <p>The company said it is unclear whether personal information has been compromised—the subscription system affected by the attack contains names, addresses, phone numbers, and subscription history of customers. Data such as passwords, read history, and financial information are not affected, the company said.</p> <p>Amedia publishes more than 90 newspapers and other publications that reach more than 2.5 million Norwegians, according to the company’s website.</p> <p>“We are in the process of gaining an overview of the situation, but do not yet know the full potential for damage. We have already implemented comprehensive measures to limit the damage and to restore normal operations as quickly as possible,” said Executive Vice President of Technology, Pål Nedregotten in a translated statement on the company’s website.</p> <p>Amedia did not immediately respond to a request for additional information.</p> <p>Third attack in recent days</p> <p>The attack on Amedia is the third major Norwegian cyberattack reported over the last several days.</p> <p>Nortura, one of the country’s largest food producers, announced on December 21 that it had shut down its IT systems after suffering a cyberattack at several factories. The company said it is investigating the incident with help from the police, and that it is focusing on minimizing damage to systems and operations.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/29 Pilots: chaotic collapse Afghan air force
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/pilots-detail-chaotic-collapse-afghan-air-force-2021-12-29/
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON, Dec 29 (Reuters) - Hours before Kabul fell to the Taliban on Aug. 15, the Afghan Air Force was melting down. Instead of unleashing air attacks against advancing insurgents, some airmen were fighting each other.</p> <p>At the Kabul airport, some Afghan Air Force personnel guarding the airfield tried to force their way onto a military helicopter preparing to lift off, according to the Afghan Air Force pilot flying the craft and two other people familiar with the incident. The chopper's destination was across town, but the guardsmen were convinced it was leaving the country and were determined not to be left behind, the pilot told Reuters. Another guard, trying to stop them, pointed his gun at the cockpit.</p> <p>Bedlam ensued. Shots rang out. Bullets pierced the helicopter. Debris and metal flew, injuring the pilot and another airman on board; both required treatment. "My face became full of blood," the pilot said.</p> <p>Afghan President Ashraf Ghani fled the country later that day, hastening the collapse of the U.S.-backed government faster than even the most pessimistic defense analysts had predicted. Within hours, the Taliban stormed into Kabul, triggering a chaotic American evacuation that has damaged the presidency of U.S. leader Joe Biden.</p> <p>The melee involving Afghan Air Force members ahead of Kabul's fall hasn't been previously reported. Reuters also learned exclusive details from airmen and former Afghan officials who participated in the secret operation to fly Ghani and his entourage to neighboring Uzbekistan on Aug. 15, and the role the chaos at the airport may have played in the timing of his departure.</p> <p>Those episodes are among the detailed accounts compiled by Reuters from more than two dozen people, including pilots, military personnel, government officials and other veterans of the conflict in Afghanistan and the United States. Their stories provide new insight into the final days of the Afghan Air Force, once the crown jewel of the nation's military.</p> <p>The United States had spent billions building a flying force in Afghanistan to give Kabul an edge over Islamic insurgents. Bombing raids killed countless Taliban fighters, who had no air power of their own.</p> <p>But that project unraveled in just weeks after the United States began withdrawing support in mid-2021 as part of its final pullout from the country.</p> <p>Militants in sneakers and battered pickup trucks swiftly seized unprotected air bases as soldiers guarding those facilities gave up, often without a fight. Ammunition ran low. Aircraft fell into disrepair. Pilots pulled functioning planes and choppers back to Kabul to protect the capital, the last government stronghold.</p> <p>But they would never execute that strategy. News of Ghani's departure triggered a mass exodus of airmen trying to save their equipment - and themselves. Pilots, aircrews and even some of their relatives piled haphazardly into aircraft and fled the country. More than a quarter of the nation's fleet ended up in neighboring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Afghan and U.S. officials say.</p> <p>"To be honest, we lost control" at the end, one former Afghan Air Force official said.</p> <p>The fall was so swift that the Pentagon immediately dispatched U.S. forces to Kabul to cripple dozens of U.S.-supplied aircraft left behind to make them worthless to the Taliban.</p> <p>John Michel, a retired brigadier general who once led the U.S. training mission for the Afghan Air Force, expressed sadness, but not surprise, at the force's demoralized finale. He contends that the U.S. template upon which it was modeled was not suited for a place like Afghanistan.</p>

"It was an overly ambitious project that was, from the beginning, doomed," Michel said.

BUILT TO FAIL

The rapid disintegration was emblematic of the wider failures of the 20-year U.S. involvement in Afghanistan.

Along with elite Special Forces units, the Afghan Air Force had been held up by the United States as proof that the drive to create a modern military to fight the Taliban was bearing fruit. The effort produced hundreds of courageous pilots who performed admirably under fire. But the force remained dependent on its American partners for core functions including aircraft maintenance and logistics. Impoverished Afghanistan, rife with corruption, lacked the military-industrial ecosystem and deep bench of talent needed for such an endeavor to stand on its own.

The Biden administration's decision this year to withdraw from Afghanistan all U.S. military personnel and contractors supporting the Afghan Air Force quickly exposed this weakness. Video chats with remote support staff could not replace on-the-ground help.

Asked about Reuters' findings about the crippling effects of ending hands-on assistance, the Pentagon said it had supported the Afghan Air Force even after the withdrawal, paying airmen's salaries, training pilots overseas, even conducting air strikes from overseas bases outside Afghanistan in support of Afghan air and ground forces into early August.

General Frank McKenzie, head of the U.S. military's Central Command, warned Congress in April that he was concerned about "the ability of the Afghan Air Force to fly ... after we remove the support for those aircraft."

It didn't take long. As the Taliban rolled through Afghanistan, grabbing province after province, the Afghan Air Force was asked to do more than ever to support the floundering ground war: bombing raids, medical rescues, troop transports. Its aircraft, meanwhile, were failing from overuse and lack of maintenance. The force lost one out of five usable aircraft between the end of June and the end of July alone, according to Pentagon data.

Ammunition too, was in short supply, Reuters has learned. An Afghan pilot, who asked to be identified only by his first name, Shah, recalled flying a dangerous medical evacuation mission in July to recover wounded and dead Afghan troops in Spin Boldak, near the border with Pakistan. Shah said he had two armed MD-530 attack helicopters to escort his UH-60 Black Hawk chopper. But one of the pilots warned they were low on ammunition and might not be able to help if Shah came under Taliban fire, the airman recalled.

Shah described a desperate scramble at the recovery site. "We were piling up bodies," he recalled. "There was even no time to check (for) their heart beat, due to high risk." Shah is still in Afghanistan, hiding from the Taliban.

A shortage of laser-guided bombs used for precise targeting of Taliban positions was also a guarded secret in Kabul in the final weeks of the war, said Hamdullah Mohib, who was Afghanistan's national security adviser.

"Our fear was that if we made this information public, it would further embolden the Taliban and demoralize ground troops," Mohib told Reuters.

The Pentagon, in a statement to Reuters, confirmed it halted a delivery of GBU-58 laser-guided bombs prior to the collapse of Afghanistan, but did not elaborate. A U.S. defense official said Washington did not believe that decision harmed Afghan military operations.

Lords of the skies over Afghanistan, Afghan Air Force pilots such as Colonel Mohammad Tawiq Safi found themselves in peril as regional air bases below them fell to the Taliban.

Safi was a wing commander in Mazar-e-Sharif, overseeing operations in north and northeast Afghanistan. He told Reuters he knew trouble was afoot on Aug. 14 when local Afghan Army troops stopped answering his calls. Soldiers meant to protect the city - and his airfield - had abruptly folded. The 150 or so remaining airmen were on their own.

Safi gave the order to his airmen to retreat to Kabul, 200 miles away, where the Afghan Air Force had hoped to regroup for counter-attacks. By the time he got his own A-29 Super Tucano light attack plane aloft, he said, the fast-closing insurgents had struck his aircraft. Safi managed a landing, but was badly injured. Rescued by helicopter, Safi was ferried to Uzbekistan where he was hospitalized and ultimately evacuated to the United States in October.

The Taliban also hunted Afghan pilots on the ground. In the final months of the war, the Islamic militants devoted special attention to assassinating airmen when they stepped off base - a deliberate strategy to weaken the deteriorating air advantage of the U.S.-backed government. At least seven pilots were killed off base this year in a series of targeted killings, Reuters reported in July.

More would follow. The last to die in this Taliban hit campaign may have been Hamidullah Habibi, a U.S.-trained Black Hawk helicopter pilot. A week before the Taliban seized Kabul, Habibi was killed in the capital on Aug. 7 by a sticky bomb attached to a vehicle, former officials and a family member said. The Taliban claimed responsibility.

The airmen also faced danger from their fellow countrymen as Afghanistan came unglued. Pilots controlled a precious means of escape, and some Afghans were willing to do anything to get on board their aircraft.

The Aug. 15 scuffle between airmen at the Kabul airport was foreshadowed days earlier in Herat province in northwest Afghanistan.

The Taliban declared victory in Herat on Aug. 12. Shortly before that, government officials and soldiers in the province wrangled over who could evacuate using the last available Afghan Air Force helicopters at Camp Zafar, home of the Afghan Army's 207th Corps, said a pilot and two former Afghan officials familiar with the incident.

Abdul Sabur Qane, Herat's provincial governor, and Ismail Khan, a powerful militia commander, demanded to be flown out with two other associates, the Afghan sources said. But the Afghan Army wouldn't let them. There were hundreds of soldiers at the base and only a couple of helicopters. The message: Either everyone leaves or no one does, the people said.

"The soldiers, they didn't allow them" to take the choppers, the pilot said.

Khan and his associates were later captured by the Taliban, then released. Khan and Qane could not be reached for comment.

WRECKING BALL

When the United States lost the war to the Taliban, it left behind a war chest of weaponry that will arm America's former enemies for years to come. Images from Afghanistan have shown insurgents toting M4 Carbine assault rifles, clad in American-made body armor and piloting U.S.-supplied armored vehicles. Ensuring they didn't inherit an Air Force, too, became an urgent final mission for the United States.

Afghan pilots estimate they flew 46 aircraft to neighboring Uzbekistan and at least another 17 to Tajikistan, where they remain. The United States is weighing requests by those Central Asian countries to keep some of those aircraft, U.S. officials told Reuters.

Then there was the handiwork of U.S. Army Major Frank Kessler. A member of the Army's 82nd Airborne Division, Kessler flew into Afghanistan on Aug. 17, two days after the fall of Kabul. His mission was to locate Afghan aircraft and other military equipment, then trash it to keep it out of Taliban hands.

In his first interview about his mission, Kessler told Reuters that his team of about 100 people located 73 military aircraft at the Kabul airport. Kessler's job was made harder by a restriction handed down from top brass: Don't use explosives and keep a low profile.

The international spotlight was burning white hot on the Kabul airport in August. Washington had struck a fragile agreement with the conquering Taliban to allow the U.S. military to conduct evacuation operations at the airfield through Aug. 31. Blowing up planes at the airport could further panic the throngs of Afghans trying to board flights out. The sound might also tip off the Taliban that the Americans were destroying some of the most prized spoils of war. Subtler methods were needed.

"We couldn't take a thermite grenade or attach C-4 (explosives) to all the equipment there," Kessler said.

He declined to say exactly how the team disabled the aircraft, mostly UH-60 Black Hawk and Russian-made Mi-17 helicopters. But a U.S. defense official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the sabotage ran the gamut from low-rent vandalism such as clogging fuel lines with sand to the removal of sensitive, high-tech equipment. Images of the Kabul airport released by media organizations following the U.S. evacuation showed choppers and planes with windows bashed in, avionics ripped out and doors missing.

"We had Air Force personnel there ... (who) understand how planes work and how to make them not work," Kessler said.

The new Taliban government has expressed aspirations of building its own Air Force. It has encouraged U.S.-trained Afghan pilots to come out of hiding to help.

There have been few takers.

Six Afghan Air Force personnel still inside Afghanistan told Reuters they are terrified of their former adversaries and desperate to leave the country. Five of those in hiding described precautions like moving from house to house, deleting sensitive information from their cell phones and, in some cases, separating from family due to fears for their relatives' safety.

David Hicks, a retired U.S. brigadier general who once commanded training for the Afghan Air Force, now leads a charity to evacuate and resettle former Afghan personnel. His group believes it has helped get hundreds of fliers and their family members out, but estimates far more still remain in Afghanistan.

"It's not an understatement to say that they're in a desperate situation," Hicks said.

FINAL FLIGHT

After the Aug. 15 confrontation at the Kabul airport that injured two airmen, airfield security forces stopped yet another Afghan Air Force helicopter from taking off. This one was assigned to Ghani's presidential fleet. It eventually was cleared for departure, but only after one of the pilots aboard argued with the forces and Ghani's security got involved, according to several Afghans familiar with the incident.

The stand-off worried the president's inner circle. Concerns were rising about the ability of Ghani's own forces to protect him, Mohib, the national security adviser, told Reuters. While not the only factor, the incident contributed to the decision that it was time to get Ghani out of Afghanistan, Mohib said.

"One of the reasons the decision was made that it was time to evacuate was because that helicopter was actually taken hostage," Mohib said. "The fear was that some (Afghan soldiers) had gone rogue."

The disorder continued as Ghani and his entourage began boarding three helicopters on the palace grounds to flee to Uzbekistan, one of the pilots told Reuters. After the president, his wife and some top-ranking officials, including Mohib, were aboard, some of Ghani's bodyguards fought each other for the remaining seats, exchanging punches, a pilot told Reuters.

The three helicopters left the palace together just before 3 p.m., flying low to avoid radar as they headed north to keep the mission secret, the pilot said. A fourth helicopter followed in short order. One of the choppers was so crowded that the crew ordered body armor thrown overboard to lighten the load. The four aircraft carried a total of 54 people, half of them presidential security.

The pilots were told their destination just minutes before lift-off. They couldn't notify their families and left with nothing but their flight suits, two of the pilots told Reuters. Uzbek officials were surprised, too. The Afghans' unannounced landing at Termez airport triggered a scramble by Uzbek security, two Afghan pilots told Reuters.

The Uzbek foreign ministry declined to comment.

Arriving on Uzbek soil, Ghani mustered a last token of presidential gratitude for the crew.

"You saved all of our lives," the grim-faced president told them, one of the pilots told Reuters.

Ghani soon flew on to Abu Dhabi, capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which announced he and his family had been admitted on "humanitarian grounds."

Reuters was unable to reach Ghani through the UAE foreign ministry or via former members of his government.

Around 17 airmen - pilots, flight engineers and maintenance crew - had helmed Ghani's mad dash to Uzbekistan. They boarded a charter flight to Abu Dhabi on Aug. 16 and eventually were moved into a humanitarian camp there. All are still awaiting U.S. resettlement.

Saying they feel forgotten by the U.S. government, and worried for their families back in Afghanistan, two of the pilots appealed for American help during interviews with Reuters.

"We did our duty," one said.

A U.S. embassy spokesperson in Abu Dhabi declined to comment on the pilots' individual cases, but said in a statement that processing, screening and vetting of Afghans for relocation to the United States was a top priority.

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HEADLINE	12/29 Afghan evacuees abroad, US bases wait
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/29/politics/afghan-refugees-wait/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)Aminullah Hotaki flew out of Afghanistan on September 21 with his wife and 5-year-old son. They landed in the United Arab Emirates where they expected to stay for a short period of time before coming to the United States.</p> <p>Now, three months later, he is still there.</p> <p>Hotaki is among the approximately 2,900 people who are at lily pad locations overseas that the United States used to process evacuees prior to their arrival to the US.</p> <p>It's just one part of an ongoing and historic effort to resettle tens of thousands of Afghans after a frenzied evacuation out of Afghanistan this year. Around 83,000 Afghan nationals, American citizens, and lawful</p>

permanent resident arrived in the US as part of Operation Allies Welcome, according to the Department of Homeland Security.

The scramble to leave Afghanistan resulted in thousands of Afghans departing with little to no belongings, including crucial paperwork. The lack of documentation and other setbacks, like a measles outbreak that put a pause on flights to the US, has left many on bases for prolonged periods of time.

Hotaki does not have his passport with him because he dropped it at the US embassy in Kabul just days before the Taliban took over, he told CNN. The hope was to get the process churning for his special immigrant visa, which provides a pathway to the United States for Afghans who were employed by or worked on behalf of the US government. But the Afghan, who worked doing IT for US forces in Kandahar for years, never got his passport back because the US had to flee the embassy.

While it's unclear why Hotaki's case has been delayed, documents are often critical to the vetting process. Without it, the process can take longer.

The State Department would not comment on Hotaki's specific case.

"The United States is working closely with allies and partners on our shared objective of quickly assisting vulnerable Afghans including by providing humanitarian aid, safe haven, and refugee resettlement. We are working to find ways to facilitate travel for those who do not have all the required documentation," said a State Department official.

Earlier this year, the Biden administration surged personnel to transit countries to help process Afghan evacuees, including taking their fingerprints, biometrics, among other information. Individuals are fully screened and vetted before they board a flight to the US, and according to DHS, the multi-layered vetting process continues upon their arrival.

But as Hotaki waits, he's also without other medical necessities. He takes blood pressure medicine and he began taking depression medicine after he was attacked by the Taliban in February, when they found out he had worked with the US. He doesn't have access to either in Abu Dhabi.

"I do not have clothes or medicine," he said. "And when I close my eyes, I think the Taliban is in front of me and hitting me again in the head."

Arriving at US military bases

For many Afghan nationals who have arrived in the US, their first stop was a domestic military base before resettlement in US communities. Nearly 48,000 Afghans have been resettled, according to the administration, but tens of thousands are still waiting to move to their permanent homes in the US.

It's been a heavy lift for the Biden administration in the wake of a dismantled refugee resettlement infrastructure that struggled to stay afloat amid [record low admissions under former President Donald Trump](#).

"It's going as well as it can possibly go, given the chaos of the evacuation," said Mark Hetfield, president and CEO of HIAS, a refugee resettlement agency. "The State Department and the US government have really been doing their best to be creative and integrate the Afghans off the bases, given the evisceration of the US resettlement program over the last four years."

The administration expects to move all Afghans off the domestic bases by mid-February, according to officials.

The Defense Department previously estimated that it would cost around \$4.2 billion to facilitate resettlement of more than 65,000 Afghans at overseas and US military installations through December, according to the department. But because of a freeze on resettlement over a measles outbreak and the

difficulty in finding housing, among other challenges, Congress provided an additional \$4.3 billion in supplemental funding.

Afghans in the US tell CNN of intense struggles they faced at the military bases and in communities across the US.

"I stayed at Fort Pickett for 91 days and some of my colleagues are still at the fort and probably will not be out until mid-February 2022. This caused mass depression. Many pregnant women failed to live in limbo and attempted to commit suicide considering hormonal changes," said Ahmad Zafar Shakibi.

He also said there was a tremendous amount of misunderstanding, harassment, and bigotry in the camps, particularly as the US and Afghan cultures collided.

Unemployed and needing assistance

Shakibi, who came to the US with his wife and 3-year-old child, has been relocated to New York. He is now looking for daycare for his child and employment for himself.

"Unemployment still haunting," he says.

Some Afghans in the US are spending hours each day walking their children to school because they don't have a car. Others are having troubles learning how to pay bills and find basic necessities to live.

"The majority of them still don't have their food stamps and are starving," Shakibi said, noting that some Afghans are in hotels, Airbnb, temporary houses, or in churches across the country.

"It is hard. On a personal level I feel guilt all the time," said Mohammad Haroon Amiri, who is living with family in California with his children and wife until they are on their own feet. He would like to stay in California but he plans to take a job in Indiana once his background check is complete because it's the only job offer he has so far.

"I want to take control myself," Amiri said. "This is how life is, things go the way you do not expect them to go."

Over the last four years, refugee resettlement agencies lost staff and had to close offices in the wake of declining refugee admissions, leaving them to rely heavily on volunteers to assist those refugees who are joining new communities.

Refugee advocates have largely commended the Biden administration for its assistance in the effort and credited former Delaware Gov. Jack Markell for his role in organizing public and private support. But Markell is set to step down next month to serve as the ambassador to Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

President Joe Biden [tapped Markell in September](#) to be the temporary point person overseeing the administration's Afghan evacuee resettlement effort in the US. While Markell's position as lead on Afghan resettlement was always designed to be short term, his upcoming departure comes as refugee resettlement agencies still race to find housing and urge the administration to tap another person to fill his role.

"The US refugee program needs a senior White House coordinator with authority," Hetfield said.

Krish O'Mara Vignarajah, president and CEO of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, echoed Hetfield, saying Markell has "been a coordinator, troubleshooter, point guard -- all bundled into one position that has a high-level stature and authority of a close ally and friend of the President."

Some administration officials privately hoped Markell would have been able to stay in the role longer, but they say that there is a well-equipped team at the White House to continue working on resettlement support.

In an interview with CNN, Markell recognized the work ahead for the Biden administration and refugee advocates.

"These resettlement agencies are simultaneously rebuilding capacity from having lost so much capacity over the last four years and at the same time, they're handling the biggest resettlement effort in any of their lifetimes," he said.

In his role, Markell traveled around the country, engaging with state and local officials. Among the steepest challenges he and the administration faced was the housing crunch across the United States.

"Everybody understood, as did I, the fact that while these folks were here at a very good time for the job market, the housing market is very tight and very expensive, particularly in some communities across the country," Markell told CNN.

"The success here is largely dependent on the local community organizations tapping into their networks of landlords and landlords opening up their places to these evacuees," he added.

To increase options to evacuees, the Biden administration [launched a program this fall](#) that allows veterans with ties to Afghans, as well as others, the opportunity to bring them to their cities and serve as a support network as they get their lives started in the US.

At least sixty circles are approved or in the final stages of approval nationwide to support Afghan families, with more expected in the coming weeks, according to Danielle Grigsby, co-founder and director of external affairs at Community Sponsorship Hub. The hub is largely responsible for the process.

The administration has not said whether it will replace Markell, saying only that those who worked closely with him, like Special Advisor for Afghan Resettlement Curtis Ried and other senior administration officials, will continue to carry forward the effort. The administration is also expected to lean on sponsorship initiatives, like the sponsor circles, to build up capacity.

Secretary of State Tony Blinken visited the staff from resettlement agencies and Afghans who recently arrived in Virginia last week.

"To those who've made the journey who are side by side with our diplomats, our men and women in uniform in Afghanistan over the last 20 years, we're so grateful that you're here and we want to do everything we can to welcome you warmly to our country," Blinken said.

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HEADLINE	12/29 Taliban restricts women travel Afghanistan
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/28/asia/afghanistan-taliban-women-travel-intl/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)The Taliban have banned women from taking long-distance road trips in Afghanistan on their own, requiring that a male relative accompany them for any distance beyond 45 miles, according to a Taliban official speaking to CNN.</p> <p>Mohammad Sadiq Hakif Mahajer, spokesman for the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, told CNN that the new law -- forbidding women from the solo, long-distance road trips -- has been instated. He said it was designed to prevent women from coming to any harm or "disturbance."</p> <p>The new rules also call on drivers not to allow women without veils to sit in their cars, and say drivers "should stop their cars in a proper place at the time of prayers to perform prayer."</p> <p>The Taliban also imposed new rules on music and alcohol; drivers are barred from playing music in cars, and "using or transferring intoxicating things in the car is strictly prohibited," the rules say.</p>

	<p>Since seizing power in August, the Taliban has tried to present a moderate face when it comes to the rights of women as it attempts to restore frozen foreign aid.</p> <p>But women and girls' presence in public life has become precarious. Many across the country are not being allowed to return to secondary schools. Those that have resumed university classes are separated by a curtain from their male peers.</p> <p>Restrictive rules like a stay-at-home order, which was touted as being temporary, have dragged on. Most women still can't go back to work, having been barred from an array of jobs, including in government and entertainment television.</p> <p>In November, women were barred from appearing in television dramas, soap operas and entertainment shows under the Taliban's new media restrictions. Among the directives, women news presenters must now wear headscarves on screen. Similarly, men on screen must wear "proper clothes," although the guidelines do not specify which types of clothes are considered "proper."</p> <p>The Taliban also abolished the Ministry of Women's Affairs, a key body in promoting women's rights through Afghan laws. They've also rolled back the Elimination of Violence against Women Law, signed in 2009 to protect women from abuses -- including forced marriage, leaving them without recourse to justice, according to the UN.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 France shuts mosque: incite hatred, jihad
SOURCE	https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/france-shuts-mosque-over-imams-preaching/
GIST	<p>France has ordered the closure of a mosque in the north of the country because of the radical nature of its imam's preaching, regional authorities tell AFP.</p> <p>The mosque in Beauvais, a town of 50,000 people some 100 kilometers (62 miles) north of Paris, will remain shut for six months, according to the prefecture of the Oise region where Beauvais is located.</p> <p>It says the sermons there incite hatred, violence and "defend jihad."</p> <p>The move on the mosque, which has a congregation of about 400, comes two weeks after Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said he had triggered the procedure to close the site because the imam there "is targeting Christians, homosexuals and Jews" in his sermons. This, the minister said, was "unacceptable."</p> <p>The authorities say the imam, who the association claims had preached only occasionally and had now been suspended, was in fact a regular presence at the mosque, according to the official document citing the reasons for the closure seen by AFP.</p> <p>It says the imam had called the jihad, a term for war against the enemies of Islam, a "duty," and had glorified its fighters as "heroes" who protected Islam against Western influence.</p> <p>He had also labeled non-Muslims as "enemies," it says.</p> <p>"The terrorist threat remains at a very high level" and the closure had "the aim of forestalling acts of terrorism being committed," the document says.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/29 India faces threat of narco-terrorism rise
SOURCE	https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/threat-of-narco-terrorism-rise-after-taliban-takeover-of-afghanistan-121122900350_1.html
GIST	<p>India has been facing the menace of narco-terrorism since several years now. This nexus between narcotics and terrorism has serious repercussions for India's security. The 'Golden Crescent' comprising Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan is the largest producer of illicit opium and India's close</p>

proximity to the areas increases the threat it faces. And now it has become a matter of even greater concern after the [Taliban](#) takeover of [Afghanistan](#).

Entire illegal drug trade is controlled by the Taliban, who work in connivance with Pakistan intelligence agents, military officers and politicians. After the fall of Afghanistan's government this year and [Taliban](#) taking over Kabul, Indian security agencies have seized drugs being brought illegally from [Afghanistan](#) and Pakistan at the Indian ports and at borders. Illicit drug trade has increased with huge caches being smuggled inside the country.

On December 19, a Pakistani fishing boat 'Al Huseini' with six crew members and carrying 77 kg of heroin worth around Rs 400 crore was apprehended in the Indian waters off the Gujarat coast. The boat registered in Karachi was carrying this consignment to be delivered to their clients in India. The joint operation was carried out by the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) with Gujarat's Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS). This was the second joint operation of ICG and Gujarat ATS in the past three months wherein a total of Rs 550 crore worth of heroin has been seized.

As per official data, [narcotics](#) worth more than Rs 30,000 crore smuggled along the Gujarat coast have been confiscated in the last three to four years.

On December 26, BSF personnel recovered 40 kg of heroin worth Rs 200 crore in two separate incidents in Punjab's Ferozepur sector. In the first incident, troops heard a thumping sound of something hitting the ground near the border area. When the BSF personnel searched the area, they recovered 34 kg heroin concealed in 22 packets near the border outpost Mian Wali Uttar.

In the second, BSF personnel seized six packets of heroin, weighing 6 kg worth Rs 30 crore near border outpost Mohammadi Wala.

These two seizures were made just a day after over 10 kg of the substance was seized in the same region. On December 25, the BSF recovered 11 packets of heroin weighing 10.852 kg near Barreke along the India-Pakistan border.

Last November, the ATS had seized a heroin consignment worth about Rs 600 crore from an under-construction house in Morbi district of Gujarat. According to the ATS, the consignment was sent by Pakistani drug dealers to their Indian counterparts.

Kabul fell to the [Taliban](#) on August 15 and soon after Indian security agencies seized another large consignment smuggled into India. On September 13, around 3,000 kg of heroin was seized from two containers at Gujarat's Mundra port and the consignment had come from Afghanistan, concealed in jumbo bags said to contain unprocessed talc powder.

The seizure made during a joint operation by the Customs department and the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence was valued at around Rs 20,000 crore.

Such a big seizure led to a thorough investigation, which is still continuing and in a series of raids across the country, eight persons, including Afghan and Uzbekistan nationals, were arrested.

Prior to this, in last April, Indian agencies apprehended a boat with Pakistan nationals from Indian waters near the Jakhau coast. The boat was carrying 30 kg of heroin worth about Rs 150 crore.

The security agencies are investigating the route and source of all these consignments seized during 2021.

After the Taliban regime's returned in Afghanistan, the cases have been rising in India. Taliban regime is consolidating their grip over the illegal drug trade and Indian agencies are keeping a strict vigil at the borders to thwart such activities.

	<p>Afghanistan and Pakistan alone have shared nearly 6000 metric tonnes of the total illicit production in 1999. This year, Afghanistan's harvest will account for more than 90 per cent of worldwide illegal heroin production. This illicit production which is mostly rooted to fund terror activities in India is a matter of grave concern. These drugs are the major source of funding for Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in this country.</p> <p>India has been the victim of state-sponsored terrorism for the last two decades. The Pakistan government in collaboration with the ISI uses proceeds of illicit narcotic drugs to fund terrorism in India. Pakistan also conspires to create ethnic division in the country by exploiting the religious sentiments and economic backwardness of people in the bordering states of Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Assam, Manipur and other states. The ISI often allures poor people in these states into illicit narcotic drugs trade to fund terrorist activities in India.</p> <p>The economy of Pakistan and Afghanistan is dependent on the production of poppy and cannabis. The drug money is being floated into the Indian money market, which also damages Indian financial institutions. The illicit drug trafficking from Afghanistan and Pakistan threatens the polity, economy and security of India. Indian agencies are beefing up security at the borders and ports and formulating strategies at war footing to check this threat, which has been recognised by the UN as well.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/29 Indonesia delay sentence top terror suspect
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/indonesian-prosecutors-delay-sentence-for-top-terror-suspect/
GIST	<p>JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Indonesian prosecutors postponed their sentencing demand Wednesday for a top terror suspect who eluded capture for 18 years and is accused of masterminding deadly attacks and sectarian conflict in the world's most populous Muslim nation.</p> <p>Aris Sumarsono, 58, better known as Zulkarnaen, is the former military commander of Jemaah Islamiyah, a Southeast Asian militant group with ties to al-Qaida which the U.S. has designated a terrorist group. The group is widely blamed for attacks including the 2002 bombings on the Indonesian resort island of Bali that killed 202 people, mostly foreign tourists, as well as attacks in the Philippines.</p> <p>Prosecutors were scheduled to issue their sentencing demand on Wednesday, but said they have not finished preparing it.</p> <p>"We need time to study this case before we issue our demand," prosecutor Teguh Suhendro said in a hearing at East Jakarta District Court held remotely due to the coronavirus pandemic.</p> <p>The demand was initially scheduled for Nov. 24, but has been postponed several times. Presiding Judge Alex Adam Faisal ordered prosecutors to present their demand on Jan. 5.</p> <p>Zulkarnaen had eluded capture since being named a suspect in the October 2002 suicide bombings at Paddy's Pub and the Sari Club in Bali. He was arrested last year in Lampung, the same southern town on Sumatra island where Jemaaah Islamiyah bombmaker Upik Lawanga was arrested a week earlier. The two were tried separately at the same court. Lawanga, who was on the police wanted list for 16 years, was sentenced to life imprisonment on Dec. 8.</p> <p>Police were tipped off to his hideout after interrogating several suspected militants arrested earlier.</p> <p>Since May 2005, Zulkarnaen has been listed on an al-Qaida sanctions list by the U.N. Security Council for being associated with Osama bin Laden or the Taliban.</p> <p>He became operations chief for Jemaah Islamiyah after the arrest of his predecessor, Encep Nurjaman, also known as Hambali, in Thailand in 2003.</p> <p>The United States' "Rewards for Justice" program had offered a bounty of up to \$5 million for his capture. He was the only Indonesian on the list.</p>

	<p>Zulkarnaen argued that he was a leader of the network's military wing but was not involved at all levels of operation in the Bali bombings because he was focusing on organizing followers in sectarian conflicts in Ambon and Poso and in the southern Philippines.</p> <p>During his trial that began in September, other convicted militants in the 2002 Bali bombings, including Umar Patek and Ali Imron, who were sentenced to 20 years and life in jail respectively, supported Zulkarnaen's argument, saying he knew about the plot but did not play a role in its operation.</p> <p>An Indonesian court banned Jemaah Islamiyah in 2008, and a sustained crackdown by security forces with support from the U.S. and Australia helped weaken the militant network.</p> <p>Militant attacks on foreigners in Indonesia have largely been replaced in recent years by smaller, less deadly strikes targeting the government, mainly police and security forces, inspired by Islamic State group tactics abroad.</p> <p>Indonesia's police counterterrorism unit, known as Densus 88, has arrested more than 500 suspected Jemaah Islamiyah members in the past two years, including a member of the Indonesia Ulema Council, the country's highest Islamic body, who was arrested last month.</p> <p>Authorities estimate the group has more than 6,000 members.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Islamic States' expansion across Africa
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/28/congo-attacks-show-islamic-states-expansion-across/
GIST	<p>The Islamic State's foothold across Africa is expanding amid a recent spate of gruesome attacks and there are growing fears in Washington that the terror group, as well as other extremist outfits like it will use the continent as a staging ground for future jihadist strikes against the West.</p> <p>After years of ISIS inroads made across North Africa and in such nations as Mali and Nigeria, counterterrorism specialists are now closely watching the group's southward movement into the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a resource-rich country that's also at the center of evolving strategic competition between the U.S. and China.</p> <p>While the Pentagon's Africa Command closely tracks terror groups operating in the Congo, the bulk of U.S. and wider Western counterterrorism operations in Africa over the past decade have been focused to the north — most notably in Somalia, the headquarters of the al Qaeda affiliate al-Shabab, and on the wider Sahel.</p> <p>The vast region, which stretches along the underbelly of the Sahara and encompasses parts of about 10 countries, has been an epicenter of extremism and home to numerous jihadi organizations since 9/11. But it's clear some of the groups are now reaching deeper into Africa.</p> <p>A Christmas Day suicide bombing outside a restaurant in Beni, Congo, killed at least five people and wounded more than a dozen others. Local officials reportedly blamed the assault on the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a group that has long been active in Congo, but is now increasingly seen to have ties to an ISIS branch known as Islamic State in Central Africa.</p> <p>The suicide bombing was the latest in a string of deadly terrorist attacks blamed on the ADF in Congo. The State Department in March designated the group as a foreign terrorist organization and labeled its leader, Seka Musa Baluku, as a "specially designated global terrorist."</p> <p>The move prohibits U.S. citizens from doing business with Baluku or others associated with the ADF. It may also signal elevated concern that the Islamic State has increased its focus on Central Africa and remains a serious threat to global stability, despite assertions by American officials that the group was</p>

“territorially defeated” by a U.S.-led military campaign across Iraq and Syria during the latter half of the last decade.

“The Islamic State’s expansion into Congo was by no means inevitable, but it was predictable,” says Katherine Zimmerman, a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute who closely tracks Islamic terrorism in the region. She added that the Islamic State’s steady move across Africa mirrors that of al Qaeda and its affiliates, including al-Shabab, with both networks posing direct threats to the West, particularly Europe.

“The rapid expansion of both transnational terrorist groups in Africa in recent years should give the U.S. and its allies pause because of how it is transforming the global threat,” she told The Washington Times in an interview. “North African networks threatened Europe in the 1990s and 2000s and could do so again even as the U.S. and its allies focus increasingly on the geostrategic competition with China and Russia.”

That high-stakes competition between the U.S. and China also is at play in Congo. China in recent years has made a concerted effort to essentially monopolize cobalt mines across Congo, with Chinese firms now controlling at least 15 of the 19 major cobalt mines in the country, according to a recent New York Times report.

Cobalt is used to manufacture jet engines, batteries, and other products vital to Beijing’s effort to expand its influence, grow its military, and ultimately supplant the U.S. as the world’s leading superpower.

Analysts say Beijing’s growing presence in Congo is one example of how China views Africa as fertile ground for its global expansion. China’s first major overseas military installation is in Djibouti, along Africa’s northeastern coast.

The U.S., meanwhile, also has troops stationed in Djibouti. The Pentagon for several years has kept the specifics of its African troop deployments hidden, but there are believed to be about 6,000 American forces on the continent, with some stationed in Niger, Kenya, and elsewhere.

The U.S. also conducts air operations against al-Shabab in Somalia, a country wracked by dysfunction and political turmoil.

‘Wildfire of terrorism’

The threat of terrorism is also growing in other parts of Africa.

At least 41 people were killed last week in a deadly assault in northern Burkina Faso, according to news wire reports in the region.

It was merely the latest in a litany of terrorist assaults across the Sahel, with major attacks in Niger, Mali and elsewhere claiming thousands of lives in recent years.

U.S. military officials have said that despite multinational counterterrorism efforts — including a long-running French anti-terror campaign in the Sahel — extremism has continued to spread.

“I am concerned about the security situation across a band of Africa,” Gen. Stephen Townsend, the head of U.S. Africa Command, told reporters over the summer as he detailed counterterrorism efforts on the continent.

“All of that does not seem to be sufficient enough to stop what I call ... [the] wildfire of terrorism that’s sweeping that region,” he said.

The prospect of an expanding ADF-ISIS connection is especially concerning. While Nigeria’s Boko Haram group has made global headlines with its direct pledges of allegiance to the Islamic State, the ADF’s ties to the broader ISIS organization have been more murky.

It's unclear whether the ADF takes its orders directly from Islamic State leaders or if it acts more autonomously. What is clear is that the group has adopted some of the brutal tactics first brought to prominence by ISIS during its reign of terror in Iraq and Syria last decade.

Over the summer, for example, ADF released several videos of beheadings. Since then it has launched numerous car-bomb attacks and at least two suicide bombings, including the Christmas attack in Beni.

The group has killed hundreds across the Congo and has displaced at least 14,000 of the country's citizens, according to data compiled by the Counter Extremism Project.

Researchers say that while there are still questions about the exact day-to-day relationship between the ADF and the Islamic State more broadly, it's clear the group has adopted ISIS' brutality, its propaganda and its recruitment efforts.

"The debate should no longer concern whether the ADF has a formal relationship with the Islamic State but rather focus on the nature of that relationship," researchers with George Washington University's Program on Extremism wrote in an analysis of the ADF earlier this year.

"It is evident that the Islamic State is leveraging these activities to demonstrate that it remains a relevant and active movement with a broad transnational reach, despite its loss of territorial control across Syria and Iraq," they wrote. "With formal Islamic State affiliates and pro-Islamic State groups dotted across Africa, the potential for transnational collaboration and the migration of increased numbers of regional foreign fighters may threaten regional stability."

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HEADLINE	12/28 Anti-Taliban resistance begs US support
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/28/afghanistan-anti-taliban-resistance-begs-for-us-su/
GIST	<p>Pro-democracy fighters in Afghanistan's Panjshir Valley may be bloodied but are not bowed in opposing the Taliban, who have claimed victory over the entire country, a resistance leader told The Washington Times.</p> <p>Ali Nazary, head of foreign relations for the National Resistance Front (NRF), said the pro-democracy fighters in Afghanistan's fabled valley need foreign nations to back their efforts to turn back the Taliban and the flood of terrorist groups that he says have poured into the country.</p> <p>"Whatever happens in Afghanistan will impact the international community," Mr. Nazary said in an interview. "We believe the U.S. and any other country that believes international terrorism is a threat to its security and to its national interests has to assist us because we are the only forces fighting against international terrorism."</p> <p>Since the U.S. withdrawal in mid-August, the Biden administration has ignored the scores of fighters backed by ISIS, al Qaeda, and other terrorist groups pouring into the country, he said. And the estimated 50,000 strong Taliban, which has a long history of partnering with terrorist organizations, has no hope of providing security and stability in a country on the cusp of an economic and humanitarian disaster.</p> <p>"These are facts that haven't been accepted by the international community, especially the United States," Mr. Nazary said. "The threat of international terrorism is growing every day that passes — and not only from ISIS but al Qaeda and the Taliban themselves."</p> <p>Mr. Nazary says the NRF, armed with an estimated 10,000 former Afghan soldiers, special forces commandos and police, is quickly becoming the U.S.' last remaining option to counter the Taliban and the scores of terrorist groups flooding Afghanistan. But he says time is running out.</p> <p>"We are the only forces inside Afghanistan that are militarily challenging all of them," Mr. Nazary said.</p>

“We cannot do this all alone,” he said. “My main appeal to the administration, to the U.S. Congress, and to others outside of government has been that this is the only option that the U.S. has. But it is not an option that will always persist.”

Led by Ahmad Massoud, the son of the late U.S.-allied Northern Alliance commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, the NRF formed in mid-August amid the collapse of the U.S.-backed government in Afghanistan.

The 32-year-old Mr. Massoud and his followers decamped to the mountainous region his father had defended amid a constant onslaught of Soviet offensives in the 1980s and later against the Taliban after they gained power in the 1990s. They pledged to stand up against the Taliban’s Islamic fundamentalism and fight for the same pro-democratic platform the Northern Alliance touted decades before.

Mr. Massoud says his forces need more arms for a protracted conflict because Taliban forces have surrounded Panjshir and cut off supply lines to replenish troops and weapons.

Rep. Michael Waltz of Florida and Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, both Republicans, met with representatives from the NRF in late August and pledged support for the anti-Taliban resistance.

But neither the White House nor the State Department publicly backed the NRF, and in early September, Taliban fighters posted photos of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’s flag raised in over Panjshir — dashing hopes of stalling the fundamentalist government.

Mr. Waltz, a former Army Green Beret on the House Armed Services Committee, said that, from a national security standpoint, it is “grossly irresponsible” for the administration not to engage with the Afghan resistance.

“They’re begging us now to be a partner,” Mr. Waltz said. “If you look at what they stand for, versus what the Taliban are actually doing, what more does the administration need to see?”

A senior administration official said U.S. government officials talk “to a range of Afghan leaders,” but declined to comment on where the White House stands with the NRF.

“We do not go into the details of all our diplomatic engagements,” the official said.

Mr. Waltz pledged in September to “take a page out of ‘Charlie Wilson’s War,’” referring to the book and movie about the flamboyant Texas Democratic congressman known for securing millions of dollars for the CIA to arm the Afghans fighting against Soviet occupiers in the 1980s.

Mr. Nazary said such support has yet to materialize, as the NRF’s pleas are met with silence from the Biden administration. “Seeing inaction from this administration is just mind-boggling,” he said.

In Panjshir, both sides claimed to have inflicted heavy casualties throughout weeks of clashes in September, though reports have not been independently verified.

Afghanistan’s former vice president, Amrullah Saleh, who joined the resistance in Panjshir, said the Taliban had blocked humanitarian access and cut phone service and electricity in the region. He also claimed that the Taliban had begun forcing “military-age men” to clear minefields in the area.

Still, Mr. Nazary said the Taliban will struggle to maintain control in the valley.

“Panjshir has never been somewhere where the people have welcomed invaders,” he said. “Anyone who enters that valley throughout history has faced defeat.”

He said the NRF currently controls more than 60% of Panjshir, which is made up of an endless network of sub valleys that branch off of the main artery. The NRF allowed the Taliban to take control of the

highly visible thoroughfare, he said, as the group adjusted its strategy to avoid protracted skirmishes with the well-armed Taliban.

Furthermore, Mr. Nazary said support for the NRF is beginning to expand beyond Panjshir as the Taliban fails to deliver stability.

“The resistance is growing now because the population is now facing a humanitarian crisis,” he said.

“They see the Taliban as a disruptive force, a force that is unable to bring stability and security, a force that is unable to deliver services to feed them,” he said. “So they have no other choice and the only reasonable option that they have is the NRF.”

But, Mr. Nazary said, the NRF can only hold out so long without U.S. assistance.

In the absence of constant, on-the-ground reporting, the state of play in Panjshir is difficult to verify. Western media outlets have noted few signs of Taliban opposition in the region in the weeks following the Taliban offensive, and some analysts in Washington maintain a more pessimistic view of the emergence of a formidable challenge to Taliban control.

Nonetheless, Mr. Nazary said supporting the NRF’s resistance may be the U.S.’ only option to thwart the growing threat of international terrorism and keep the Taliban in check.

In September, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark A. Milley told the House Armed Services Committee that terrorist organizations could regain footing in Afghanistan in as soon as six months.

Gen. Milley also conceded that the pullout damaged the ability to confront potential terrorist threats in the region.

“I think the ends are going to remain the same to protect the American people, but I think the ways and means are going to change,” he said. “I think it is going to become much more difficult now to conduct counterterrorism operations against a reconstituted al Qaeda or ISIS in Afghanistan. Not impossible ... but it will be more difficult.”

The Biden administration has lauded its over-the-horizon counter-terrorism strategy, but with no military footprint and degraded intelligence capabilities in Afghanistan and the closest air base from which to fly unmanned intelligence aircraft hours away, many in Washington remain skeptical of the strategy.

The Taliban continues to vie for international recognition and claims that it has distanced itself from al Qaeda and has promised to comply with international standards for human rights.

“It is a false premise from those who believe that they have bargaining chips with the Taliban, that will enable change in the Taliban behavior over the long term,” said Richard Goldberg a senior adviser at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. “If anybody has watched the Taliban for the last couple of years, we should be very clear-eyed that any promise or statement from the Taliban is completely worthless.”

Mr. Nazary said he fears international leaders have already begun to cave to the Taliban and says that as long as they remain in power, the threat of terrorism continues to grow.

Last week, the Biden administration announced it was easing some restrictions on humanitarian aid to Afghanistan to help alleviate the worsening economic crisis. More aid organizations will now be able to assist in the Taliban-ruled country without violating sanctions against the Taliban and Haqqani network, a group of Afghan Islamic guerrilla insurgents.

Critics said the move sends the wrong message.

“Unfortunately, the Biden administration’s shortsighted decision to offer broad sanctions carveouts could result in using American taxpayer funds to reward, legitimize and enable the same Taliban that took power by force and has shown no interest in abiding by international norms,” said Rep. Michael T. McCaul of Texas, the top Republican on the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Mr. Nazary fears the Biden administration and leaders across the globe are on a slippery slope toward recognizing the fundamentalist government.

“We believe there’s too much being given away to the Taliban, even if they’re not recognized,” Mr. Nazary said.

“The only thing the Taliban know is destruction. That’s what they were made for. They weren’t made for good governance. They weren’t made to become statesmen.”

The White House has reiterated that no country, including the U.S., has recognized the Taliban. Both the Taliban and the Haqqani network remain sanctioned by the U.S. and United Nations.

“We have worked with the United Nations and other international institutions to accelerate the provision of liquidity, as well as resources to ensure that the basic human needs of the people of Afghanistan are being met,” a senior administration official said. “We are getting the relief to people across the country as winter approaches”

“Our diplomats will continue to press the Taliban through multiple channels to address basic human rights issues, provide access to education for women and girls, and to fulfill their counterterrorism commitments,” the official added.

While Mr. Goldberg did not specifically endorse the NRF, he said it could make sense for the U.S. to look for partners in Afghanistan as a potential check on the Taliban.

“Members of Congress should ask for a series of briefings from the intelligence community to be looking very closely at any opposition that exists,” said Richard Goldberg, a senior adviser at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

Mr. Nazary said the NRF’s calls for U.S. support went unheeded by the administration, despite the increasingly dire picture in Afghanistan.

As the NRF waits for its chance to retake Panjshir, it has ramped up efforts to influence powerbrokers outside of Afghanistan. Last month, NRF supporters staged demonstrations in 22 cities around the globe.

“We were able to show that the diaspora communities throughout the globe support the National Resistance Front,” Mr. Nazary said. “We have the popular support whether inside Afghanistan or outside.”

Mr. Nazary said the NRF has mobilized Afghan communities around the globe.

“If the Taliban control the geography, we have the popular support with us,” he said. “We have legitimacy.”

In October, the NRF registered in Washington as a lobbying group.

“If the United States completely ignores the situation inside of Afghanistan and believes that the Taliban will stabilize the situation, we’re going to see many threats in the West, especially in the United States, in the years to come,” Mr. Nazary said.

Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	12/28 Alaska record-high December temperature
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/29/alaska-sets-record-high-december-temperature-of-194c
GIST	<p>An unusual winter warm spell in Alaska has brought daytime temperatures soaring past 15.5C (60F) and torrents of rain at a time of year normally associated with bitter cold and snow.</p> <p>At the island community of Kodiak, the air temperature at a tidal gauge hit 19.4C (67F) degrees on Sunday, the highest December reading ever recorded in Alaska, said scientist Rick Thoman of the Alaska Center for Climate Assessment and Policy. He called it “absurd.”</p> <p>The new benchmark high came amid a spate of balmy December extremes, Thoman said, including 18.3C (65F) at the Kodiak airport, a record 16.6C (62F) at the Alaska Peninsula community of Cold Bay and at least eight December days of temperatures above 10C (50F) at the Aleutian town of Unalaska, including a reading of 13.3C (56F) that was Alaska’s warmest Christmas Day on record.</p> <p>The most serious immediate implication for humans is likely from the massive amounts of precipitation dumped on interior Alaska, where the Fairbanks area was hit by its fiercest mid-winter storm since 1937, Thoman said.</p> <p>Normally, December is a dry month in interior Alaska because the usually frigid air cannot hold much moisture. Whatever moisture does flow in tends to be “the more fluffy powder because the air is nice and cold”, said Thoman, who lives in Fairbanks.</p> <p>But so much snow fell that on Sunday it caved in the roof of the sole grocery store in Delta Junction, a town 95 miles (153km) south-east of Fairbanks.</p> <p>Possibly worse, the heavy snows were followed by torrents of rain that coated communities in the region with ice, triggering widespread power outages and prompting closures of major roads and offices, as well as a nickname: Icemageddon.</p> <p>The Alaska Department for Transportation warned that roads will remain treacherous for a long time because of the cement-like ice coating that has formed on them.</p> <p>“Ice is extremely difficult to remove once it has binded to the road surface. Even though air temps were warm during ‘icemageddon2021’, roads were at sub-zero temps, which caused ice to bind to the surface,” the department said on Twitter.</p> <p>The blasts of warm and wet mid-winter weather have become more frequent in Alaska over the past two decades than in years prior, a sign of climate change, Thoman said. “This is exactly what we expect in a warming world,” he said.</p> <p>The story is similar elsewhere in the far north, where winter rains have proved treacherous to people and to grazing animals, like caribou and musk oxen, that struggle when ice on the ground covers food sources. Such hardships are expected to intensify.</p> <p>A study published last month in the journal Nature Communications projected an Arctic climate with more winter rain than snow starting around 2060 or 2070.</p> <p>Alaska will still have its winter cold – Fairbanks temperatures were forecast to plunge below minus -29C (-20F) this weekend – but warm, soggy episodes are expected to be more numerous in the future, Thoman said.</p>

	“A warming, moistening world has put our thumbs on the scale to make this more likely,” he added.
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HEADLINE	12/28 Brady list impact on police accountability
SOURCE	https://crosscut.com/inside-crosscut/2021/12/how-crosscuts-brady-list-stories-impacted-wa-police-accountability
GIST	<p>Sometimes, a reporter’s scrutiny prompts an agency to start truly scrutinizing itself.</p> <p>That’s what I found while reporting for the past year and a half on police officers who land on prosecutors’ so-called Brady lists. These lists are a way for prosecutors to track police officers who have credibility issues — things like sustained findings of dishonesty, a history of filing inaccurate reports or even a record of using excessive force. Prosecutors must share this information with defense attorneys, because it could cast doubt on an officer’s testimony in court.</p> <p>In early July of 2020, I requested the Brady files from all 39 of Washington’s county prosecutors. I thought the records might make for an interesting story in light of the increased attention on police misconduct following George Floyd’s murder by Minneapolis police.</p> <p>What I didn’t know was that, in response to my public records requests, some county prosecutors would fix gaps in their systems for tracking officers’ misbehavior — or even update their Brady lists to include officers who hadn’t been flagged before.</p> <p>In Douglas County, for instance, the county prosecutor was unaware that a local sheriff’s deputy had admitted to instances of tax evasion and fraud. That is, until we started making records requests.</p> <p>“Recently a reporter from a Seattle news agency made a request from every county and city prosecutor’s office around the state,” wrote Douglas County prosecutor W. Gordon Edgar, in a letter dated July 17, 2020. (Technically, I asked only county prosecutors and the Seattle City Attorney’s Office, but my reporting work still involved more than 100 records requests.)</p> <p>In response to those requests, a prosecutor in a neighboring county contacted Edgar to tell him about a pre-employment polygraph test in which a Douglas County deputy had admitted to questionable conduct. The deputy, who had applied for a policing job in the neighboring county, revealed he had committed insurance fraud, evaded taxes and stolen from an employer.</p> <p>According to Edgar’s letter, the Okanogan County prosecutor “felt compelled” to release a summary of the polygraph to the reporter (me), but wanted to tell Douglas County officials about it first.</p> <p>That exchange of information between prosecutors caused Edgar to reclassify the deputy as having Brady material that must be disclosed to defense attorneys.</p> <p>Those disclosures, designed to ensure defendants’ due process rights, may not have occurred without our reporting. This is not dry, technical legal maneuvering. Brady lists can have real world consequences we would all recognize, such as making it harder for a cop with credibility issues to get a new job elsewhere; forcing prosecutors to gather more evidence to prove their case; or even preventing a bad arrest or a shoddy investigation from putting someone in prison.</p> <p>In one Central Washington county, a local police chief had no idea one of his officers was on a Brady list in another county until Crosscut contacted the chief. Moxee Police Chief Jeff Burkett said in August he considered the information highly relevant and was looking into the matter.</p> <p>Other prosecutors’ offices shored up their internal notification systems, so that an officer’s past misconduct wouldn’t escape notice.</p>

In one county, the chief deputy prosecutor realized he had never seen a record of an excessive force incident involving a local law enforcement officer, even though that information was held elsewhere in his office. That's a problem because prosecutors are obligated to share information that could impeach an officer's testimony, even if they aren't personally aware of it.

"Your story led me to go back through our records and double check things.... I then updated the list and fixed a hole in our reporting system," the deputy prosecutor wrote in an email, while asking not to be identified.

These are just a few examples where Crosscut's reporting on Brady lists caused local jurisdictions to check that they were following their own policies, as well as the latest legal guidance.

State lawmakers have taken note as well. Our reporting revealed that a new police accountability law [may not apply to past misconduct](#), as key legislators had intended. Now, some legislators are talking about [whether they need to clarify the law](#) in the upcoming legislative session, which begins in January.

These are the impacts of investigative reporting that often go unseen. By forcing officials to respond to our inquiries and provide documents, reporters can prod government agencies to get their houses in order. Our goal, as government watchdogs, is more than just pointing out problems; we aim to make our democracy stronger and fairer.

"The more we talk about these issues — the more accountability there is, the more transparency there is — we get closer to the ideal," said state Sen. Manka Dhingra, the incoming chair of the Senate Law & Justice Committee, when discussing the impact of Crosscut's reporting.

In this case, our reporting is likely to help defense attorneys get more information about police officers with troubled histories. That's a win for the constitutional right to due process — and the people of Washington state.

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HEADLINE	12/28 Climate: 2021 was year of extreme weather
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/year-climate-extreme-weather-events-prove-climate-change/story?id=81771045
GIST	<p>This may have been the year the world finally began to pay attention to the mayday calls for climate change and the harmful effects warming global temperatures will have -- not just on the environment, but on human life.</p> <p>Scientists have long warned of the calamity that could result from rising global temperatures. Predictions such as extreme temperature events, the increase of severe drought and more intense storms have all come to fruition in 2021 -- around the world and close to home.</p> <p>People will soon feel the impacts in their own backyards, President Joe Biden said on Nov. 2, his last day at the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, Scotland. There, world leaders emphasized that climate change is already happening and costing billions of dollars -- about \$100 billion in the U.S. alone.</p> <p>The damage done to the Northern hemisphere this year alone has been "devastating," Jason Smerdon, a climate scientist for Columbia University's Lamont Doherty Earth Observatory, told ABC News.</p> <p>"So this is just one more piece of bad news and lots of events that are impacted by global warming," Smerdon said.</p> <p>Here are some of the biggest weather events to occur in 2021:</p> <p>Deadly flooding</p>

Devastating flash flooding events killed thousands of people all over the world in 2021. The majority of the events were a result of record rainfall.

A state of emergency was declared in Washington state last month after damaging floods resulting from [multiple occurrences of "atmospheric rivers,"](#) huge plumes of precipitation extending from the Pacific Ocean and into the Northwest. The damage to homes, public infrastructure and area business centers was estimated to cost at least \$50 million, local newspaper the Bellingham Herald reported.

A ferocious storm in the Detroit area on July 24 [flooded Interstate 94](#) and knocked out power to hundreds of thousands of people. Trees, houses and businesses sustained major damage in the storm.

Also in July, hundreds of people were either dead or unaccounted for in countries in Western Europe after [days of record rainfall](#) caused river banks to burst, triggering dangerous flooding in Germany, Belgium and southern parts of the Netherlands and Switzerland.

Dozens of people were also killed, and hundreds of thousands more displaced, after [nearly a year's worth of rain](#) came down in just three days in Henan province in July. Its capital, Zhengzhou, is located on the banks of the Yellow River. And the cleanup wasn't the sole focus amid the aftermath. Food security and supply in the country was disrupted after major roadways were transformed into riverbanks.

[One-in-100-year floods](#) are now happening so often, the term may soon need to change, Robert Mason, extreme hydrologic events coordinator and Delaware River master for the U.S. Geological Survey, told ABC News. While the term is based on existing data, it is possible for major floods happen in back-to-back years, so the USGS is looking at different ways of quantifying back-to-back major flooding events Mason said.

Raging wildfires

In August, wildfires burning through the [drought-ridden Siberian forest](#) were so widespread, the event was larger than all the fires raging this summer around the world combined.

At the same time, a major wildfire ravaged a pine forest and burned homes nears Athens, Greece, on the heels of the [country's worst heat wave](#) that left forests full of dry fuel to further spread the blaze.

Dangerous fire conditions also continued in the Western U.S. At several points over the summer, at least 50 fires were burning uncontained.

Fires in California continued to break records. The Dixie Fire, the [largest non-complex fire in California state history](#) that scorched through nearly 1 million acres, decimated the town of Greenville -- destroying more than 100 homes and leaving next to nothing untouched by flames in the downtown neighborhood.

Intense drought

Not only does drought have the ability to exacerbate wildfire conditions, but it also has the potential to debilitate communities.

For decades, scientists have been predicting an intensifying drought, especially in the Western U.S.

A [megadrought](#), a term used to describe a severe and intense drought that spans a couple of decades, is currently plaguing much of the region, [depleting reservoirs to the lowest levels in history](#) and threatening the agricultural industry.

Water levels in [Lake Mead](#) and Lake Powell, the two largest reservoirs in the country, hit alarming lows, and the [first-ever water shortage](#) was declared for Lake Mead. This year was California's driest in a century, and the West [could face a severe water crisis](#) if the trends continue.

The [megadrought is directly linked to climate change](#), and there will not be much improvement in the next century, even if precipitation were to suddenly increase, scientists say. About half of the severity of the

ongoing megadrought has been attributed to warming temperatures alone, Daniel Swan, a climate scientist at UCLA, told ABC News.

"Without that warming, the drought would arguably not be a megadrought at all," he said.

Extreme temperatures

Warming global temperatures don't always translate into warming events. Sometimes, the pendulum swings to the other extreme -- freezing temperatures.

The polar vortex that slammed Texas and other nearby states with unprecedented winter weather in February is the costliest winter event to ever occur in the U.S.

More than 10 million customers in the state were without power for more than a week following [back-to-back winter storms](#) that brought snow and arctic temperatures, [causing at least \\$20 billion in damage](#) and killing more than 170 people.

Also in February, Arctic air plagued the Chicago area with temperatures that felt like negative 30 to 50 degrees Fahrenheit. The cold snap [nearly broke records](#), with more than a two-week stretch of temperatures of 25 degrees or below.

The Pacific Northwest, known for its chilly, wet temperatures, experienced the opposite problem over the summer with multiple deadly heat waves.

A historic heat wave in the region sent temperatures soaring past 100 degrees in major cities like Seattle and Portland in June. Temperatures hit 116 degrees in some places for days on end. Another heat wave blanketed the region one month later as dozens of wildfires burned uncontained nearby.

The majority of the residents in the area, acclimated to the typical damp climate, were not equipped with air conditioning, causing concern for the health of vulnerable populations.

"When there's not relief at night, and people don't have access to air conditioning, then we're gonna see a lot more heat-related illnesses and stress," Larry O'Neill, Oregon's state climatologist, told ABC News.

The heat wave also exacerbated the megadrought, leaving even less water to maintain local biodiversity and for agriculture, said O'Neill, adding that a lot of the vegetation in the area is "drought-stressed."

These events are likely the result of a weakening polar vortex, climate scientist Jessica Moerman, vice president of science and policy at the Evangelical Environmental Network, a faith-based environmental group, told ABC News.

Powerful storms

This year did not [break records in the same way 2020 did](#), but it only took one storm to cause a record amount of damage after it tracked through the U.S.

The behavior of [Hurricane Ida is a prime example of climate change](#), according to scientists. The dangerous storm barreled through the Caribbean before taking aim at the Gulf Coast of the U.S. In the 24 hours before making landfall in Louisiana on Aug. 29, it strengthened by a whopping 55 mph, making it a Category 4 storm with maximum sustained winds of up to 150 mph.

Hurricanes have tended to intensify more rapidly over the last three years, likely due to the warmer water available, Philip Klotzbach, a research scientist at Colorado State University's Department of Atmospheric Science, told ABC News before the 2021 hurricane season began.

Ida then remained a major hurricane over Louisiana for nine hours after making landfall, something meteorologists say has never happened before.

But the damage did not stop as the remnants of Ida left the South. As the system collided with a cold front, it dumped torrential rain and spawned tornadoes and devastating flash flooding [across the Northeast](#) days after it left Louisiana. As much as 5 inches of rain per hour were reported in highly urbanized areas in New York and New Jersey. Roadways in parts of New York City transformed into rivers, killing dozens of people living in basement apartments.

Nearly 100 people in the U.S. were killed [as a result of the monster storm](#).

While the overall number of hurricanes is not likely to increase as a consequence of global warming, scientists believe that, over time, the storms that generate will get stronger and more intense.

As climate change intensifies, what is considered to be a "500-year storm" will change as well, Oscar Schofield, a professor of biological oceanography at Rutgers University, told ABC News. A 500-year storm is one that, before sea levels began to rise, would only occur once every 500 years, but since ocean levels are so much higher will occur closer to once in every 100 years, Schofield said

"A 500-year storm, in terms of flooding impacts, is going to become like a 100-year storm, because the ocean is so much higher," Schofield said. "It doesn't take as much to put push the ocean onto the shore."

The Arctic is warming twice as fast as the rest of the world

The bad news for sea level rise is the region that adds the most water to worldwide ocean levels as ice melts is also warming twice as fast as the rest of the world.

The substantial decline in Arctic sea ice extent since 1979 is one of the [most iconic indicators of climate change](#), according to the Arctic Report Card released by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration earlier this month.

The period between October and December 2020 was the warmest Arctic autumn on record, dating back to 1900, according to the report.

In addition, the average surface air temperature over the Arctic from October 2020 through September 2021 was the seventh-warmest on record. This is the eighth consecutive year since 2014 that air temperatures were at least 1 degree Celsius above the long-term average, according to the report.

The warming is occurring so swiftly that the Arctic Ocean is now acidifying faster than the global ocean and beavers are colonizing what was previously the Arctic tundra of western Alaska, which has experienced widespread greening, according to the report.

The Greenland Ice Sheet, the largest contributor to sea level rise in the world, experienced three melt episodes in late July and August, the report states.

Sea level rise will be one of the most disastrous consequences of global warming, as it erodes coastlines and eventually causes residents who live near the ocean inland, experts say.

Even if the rise seems minuscule -- about 8 inches since the Industrial Revolution, according to the [Union of Concerned Scientists](#) -- infrastructures located near the ocean were not built to withstand those levels, Schofield said.

Greenhouse gases will need to be significantly reduced

A multi-layered approach -- from policy to industry to the finance sector -- is needed to curb the necessary amount of greenhouse gases.

President Joe Biden made addressing climate change a major focus of his 2020 presidential campaign, re-joining the [Paris Agreement](#) on Inauguration Day. Climate change has also taken front stage in Biden's \$1.7 trillion infrastructure package, \$555 billion of which has been dedicated for climate and clean energy investments.

	<p>The world will need to re-think how it obtains its energy -- moving away from coal and natural gas and toward solar energy, wind farms, green hydrogen and electricity.</p> <p>The U.S. auto industry is already making efforts to ramp up use of electric cars. In August, after declaring that the U.S. must “move fast” to win the world's car-making future, Biden announced a commitment from the auto industry to raise gas mileage and cut tailpipe pollution between now and 2026.</p> <p>Ford expects 40% of its global sales to be fully electric by 2030, while General Motors is aiming to sell only electric passenger vehicles by 2035. Stellantis, formerly Fiat Chrysler, has also pledged that more than 40% of its sales will be from electrified vehicles by 2030.</p>
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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	12/28 Grant Co. deputies seize \$2M drugs
SOURCE	https://www.krem.com/article/news/crime/2-million-worth-of-drugs-seized-from-mattawa-home/293-c242d3c4-9ed9-41a7-a2bd-be89c08a53f0
GIST	<p>MATTAWA, Wash. — The Grant County Sheriff’s Office detectives seized more than \$2 million worth of drugs at a home not far from Wahluke High School in Mattawa on Dec. 23.</p> <p>According to the sheriff’s office, detectives from Grant County’s Interagency Narcotics Enforcement Team (INET) served a search warrant at 202 North Boundary Avenue. During the search, detectives seized nearly 32 pounds of methamphetamine, 25,000 fentanyl pills and \$50,000 in cash.</p> <p>The sheriff’s office says the street value of the drugs is around \$2.08 million.</p> <p>Rigoberto Tapia, 42, was arrested and booked into the Grant County Jail for possession of a controlled substance with intent to deliver with school zone enhancements due to the proximity to the high school.</p> <p>As of Tuesday afternoon, Tapia was no longer listed on the Grant County Jail roster. His arraignment is scheduled for Jan. 4 at 9 a.m.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Man attacks bartender over vax card
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/suspect-attacks-bartender-with-sharpened-broom-after-being-asked-for-vaccine-card
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — A bartender was badly slashed across her face after she asked a customer to show his vaccination card.</p> <p>The man argued with staff when they told him to leave, then he struck a bartender with a long stick he was carrying, according to police.</p> <p>The attack happened at Joe’s Bar and Grill Monday night. No matter how busy it gets, employees said they always make time to follow King County’s health order and check each customer for proof of vaccination. That rule erupted into a dangerous confrontation for bartender Felicite Ogilvy.</p> <p>“I asked him, 'do you have your vaccination card?' and he said ‘I’ve had the vaccine but I don’t have the card’ and I was like OK but you need to have proof of it,” Ogilvy said.</p> <p>Ogilvy told the man he had to leave but surveillance footage showed him lingering by the door and arguing with staff.</p>

"He ended up basically saying 'You're picking on me,'" Ogilvy said. "I'm not going to deal with it.' That's when he started getting hostile."

A coworker came over to help defuse the escalating situation - and even a few customers - but the man wouldn't go and fought back with a long stick. Witnesses said a sharp piece of metal was attached to the bottom end.

"He swung the stick as hard as he could at my face, so not only did it puncture me, he also slit me," Ogilvy said.

The wound was so deep Ogilvy needed 31 stitches to close it up. She got away from the skirmish in shock as the man ran off to a light rail station and hopped aboard a train.

Police boarded the train a few stops down the track but could not find him, and believe he may have gotten off at a previous station. Seattle police are now tracking down leads and said they been called to help deal with other conflicts over public health mandates.

"There have been a few cases here and there of restaurants and stores having issues enforcing the mandate," said Det. Patrick Michaud. "Thankfully these incidents are still fairly rare."

Ogilvy wants customers to be safe but said requiring businesses to be vaccine police has been a burden from the beginning.

"I don't agree with the mandate because it's like why am I getting hurt?" she said. "Why am I the one who has to control this?"

Ogilvy is taking a few days off to recover but plans to return to work soon. Meanwhile police are trying to ID the man in the footage and make an arrest.

King County's proof of vaccination requirement took effect Oct. 25. It applies to bars, restaurants, gyms and events such as live music or outdoor events with 500 people or more. Businesses are expected to check everyone 12 years and older and could face fines if they don't enforce the rules.

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HEADLINE	12/28 Judge: Proud Boys must face charges
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/us/proud-boys-members-must-face-jan-6-charges-us-judge-rules-2021-12-28/
GIST	<p>Dec 28 (Reuters) - A U.S. judge on Tuesday allowed a criminal case relating to the deadly Jan. 6 Capitol attack to move forward, declining to dismiss charges against four members of the far-right Proud Boys group.</p> <p>In a written ruling, U.S. District Judge Timothy Kelly rejected arguments by the four Proud Boys defendants that obstruction charges should be thrown out.</p> <p>The defendants — Ethan Nordean, Joseph Biggs, Zachary Rehl, and Charles Donohoe — have been charged with violating a federal law that makes it a felony to obstruct an official government proceeding, among other charges.</p> <p>That obstruction charge has been used by prosecutors in more than 230 of the 700 criminal cases against participants in the assault.</p> <p>Four people died on the day of the riot by supporters of then President Donald Trump and one Capitol police officer died the next day of injuries sustained while defending Congress.</p> <p>Hundreds of police were injured during the several-hour onslaught and four officers who guarded the Capitol have since taken their own lives.</p>

	<p>The Proud Boys defendants said the obstruction law is unconstitutional because it is vaguely written and could chill free speech rights.</p> <p>Kelly, who sits in the District of Columbia, rejected that argument.</p> <p>"No matter Defendants political motivations or any political message they wished to express, this alleged conduct is simply not protected by the First Amendment," Kelly said in his ruling. "Defendants are not, as they argue, charged with anything like burning flags, wearing black armbands, or participating in mere sit-ins or protests."</p> <p>About 40 defendants allegedly affiliated with far-right groups like the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters have been charged with conspiring either to impede Congress or law enforcement officials protecting the Capitol.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Calif. synagogue shooter 2nd life sentence
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/28/us/poway-synagogue-shooter-sentenced/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)John T. Earnest, who admitted to a shooting at a San Diego area synagogue that killed one and injured three others in 2019, has been sentenced to a second life sentence.</p> <p>Earnest was sentenced to life plus 30 years in prison in federal court on Tuesday after previously pleading guilty to a 113-count indictment that included hate crime and weapons violations, according to a Department of Justice news release. He was previously sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole following a plea agreement in state court.</p> <p>Lori Gilbert Kaye was killed in the shooting on the last day of Passover in 2019 when Earnest, who was 19 at the time and armed with an AR-15 style rifle, entered the crowded Chabad of Poway synagogue and began shooting.</p> <p>Earnest also admitted to setting fire to a mosque in nearby Escondido just weeks before the shooting.</p> <p>"The defendant targeted his victims because he hated the Jewish community and Muslim community, hatred that has no place in our society and hatred that will never, never win," said Randy Grossman, US attorney for the Southern District of California following Tuesday's hearing. "The defendant and his hatred have been silenced. He will spend the rest of his days and die in prison, while he languishes behind bars."</p> <p>Prosecutors noted that a manifesto written by Earnest and posted on the internet shortly before the attack was found during the investigation in which Earnest made many anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim statements, including "I can only kill so many Jews" and "I only wish I killed more."</p> <p>"All people in this country should be able to freely exercise their religion without fear of being attacked," said Attorney General Merrick B. Garland. "This defendant's horrific crime was an assault on fundamental principles of our nation. The Justice Department is steadfast in its commitment to confronting unlawful acts of hate and to holding perpetrators of hate-fueled violence accountable."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Colombia captures 5 over airport bombing
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/colombia-captures-five-people-over-airport-bombing-2021-12-28/
GIST	<p>BOGOTA, Dec 28 (Reuters) - Colombia's police captured five people during raids in the Andean country's second city Medellin and surrounding areas in connection with a bombing earlier this month at an airport in the northern city of Cucuta, it said on Tuesday.</p> <p>Three people, including two police officers, were killed on Dec. 14 after bombs exploded at the airport, which is located in Colombia's Norte de Santander province.</p>

	<p>The province, which shares a border with Venezuela, has become the new epicenter of Colombia's long internal conflict as security forces fight crime gangs dedicated to drug trafficking and rebel groups amid growing output of coca, the chief ingredient in cocaine.</p> <p>A bombing at a military base in Norte de Santander in June injured 44 people including two U.S. military advisers. In an incident later that month, shots were fired at a helicopter carrying President Ivan Duque as he traveled to Cucuta, the province's capital.</p> <p>Officials captured three men and two women during the raids, Colombia's police said in a statement, adding that they were taken to Cucuta in the early morning to face multiple charges, including for terrorism and aggravated homicide.</p> <p>The investigation continues, the police said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Airline passenger faces assault charge
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/transportation/2021/12/28/delta-mask-dispute-assault-cornwall/
GIST	<p>A Los Angeles woman is facing a federal assault charge after she allegedly punched and spit on a man aboard a recent Delta Air Lines flight following a mask dispute.</p> <p>Patricia Cornwall was detained Thursday at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport after passengers told authorities that she had caused a disturbance on Flight 2790 from Tampa. Video shared to social media appears to show Cornwall, 51, slapping a male passenger across the face during an argument over masks. The man told investigators that the maskless woman, who mockingly compared herself to Rosa Parks and told him to put on his mask as he was eating and drinking, also spit on his face and head, according to a criminal complaint unsealed Monday.</p> <p>"This disturbance [led] to the injury of fellow passengers and Delta employees," the Atlanta Police Department said in a news release.</p> <p>The complaint, filed in the Northern District of Georgia, accuses Cornwall of "assault by striking, beating, or wounding" the male passenger, who is identified only as "R.S.M." Cornwall, who made her first court appearance Monday, could face up to a year in prison and a fine up to \$100,000 if she is found guilty of the Class A misdemeanor. She did not submit a plea during her initial court appearance.</p> <p>Cornwall declined to comment Tuesday but said she and her attorney, Millie Dunn, would issue a public statement in the coming days. Dunn did not immediately respond to a request for comment.</p> <p>"I appreciate you reaching out to me as I do feel my side needs to be told," Cornwall wrote in a text message to The Washington Post.</p> <p>Drake Castañeda, a Delta spokesman, confirmed to The Post that "Flight 2790 from Tampa to Atlanta was met by law enforcement after an unruly customer disturbance during flight."</p> <p>"Situations like these are rare for the vast majority of our customers and Delta has zero tolerance for unruly behavior at our airports and aboard our aircraft," he said in a statement.</p> <p>Anthony S. Fauci, the nation's top federal infectious-disease expert, recently indicated that mask-wearing on planes could be here to stay during a time when the coronavirus is surging in the United States again because of the rapidly spreading omicron variant. Fauci, the chief medical adviser to President Biden and director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said Sunday that he would welcome a requirement that airline passengers be vaccinated. But he stressed that masks and air filtration have made it safe for people to be on airplanes. Southwest Airlines CEO Gary Kelly argued in a Senate hearing this month that masks "don't add much, if anything, in the air cabin environment."</p>

Even with the extension of the federal mask mandate on transportation [until at least March](#), aviation authorities continue to battle a wave of disruptive passengers — specifically confrontations stemming from disputes over mask-wearing. The Federal Aviation Administration says it has received 5,553 reports of unruly behavior in 2021, the vast majority of them related to incidents over mask regulations on flights. Attorney General Merrick Garland issued a memo last month directing federal authorities to [prioritize the prosecution of crimes on planes](#).

On Thursday, Cornwall was returning from the restroom when she saw a flight attendant conducting beverage service and blocking the aisle, according to the complaint. After Cornwall asked the flight attendant to help her find her seat, the flight attendant requested that she find an available seat until the conclusion of the beverage service, the complaint says.

“What am I? Rosa Parks?” said Cornwall, who is White, according to the complaint.

Upon hearing the comment, the complaint says, the male passenger sitting in seat 37C told Cornwall “it was an inappropriate comment and that she ‘isn’t Black ... this isn’t Alabama and this isn’t a bus.’ ” He then called her a catchall term popularized in recent years to describe an entitled, demanding White woman who polices other people’s behavior.

“Sit down, Karen,” he said to Cornwall, according to the complaint.

[Video posted to Twitter](#) from @ATLUncensored appears to match the description of the incident involving Cornwall. Authorities declined to confirm that Cornwall is the woman seen in the video, which has been viewed 8.7 million times as of Tuesday.

After the man calls the woman a “Karen,” the female passenger yells at the man to put on his mask as he is eating and drinking, the video shows. The woman, who has her mask pulled below her chin, calls him a sexual slur, which is then repeated by the man toward her.

When a flight attendant asks the woman to mask up, she ignores the order and asks the flight attendant to tell the male passenger to “mask up.” The man, who still has his mask off, calls the woman another derogatory term, according to video — and that is when she slaps his face.

“Now you’re going to jail! That’s assault,” the man exclaims, according to video. “You’re going to jail as soon as we get to Atlanta.”

The woman then appears to spit in the man’s face.

The two passengers were separated only by the beverage cart, but they continued to lob expletives at each other as other passengers stood up during the chaotic situation.

“I will put my mask on when you put your mask on!” the woman says, according to video.

Toward the end of the video, one passenger is heard saying that the woman “went crazy on the airplane.”

Federal Magistrate Judge Christopher Bly on Monday set Cornwall’s bond at \$20,000 but allowed her to fly home to Southern California if she followed the judge’s requirements, [CNN reported](#). However, Cornwall won’t be flying home on Delta. The airline placed the woman on its no-fly list.

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HEADLINE	12/28 Elder abuse spreads, stoked by pandemic
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/elder-abuse-spreads-stoked-by-the-pandemic-11640704358?mod=hp_featst_pos3
GIST	The pandemic’s impact on older adults went far beyond Covid-19 infections. It also made them more vulnerable to abuse.

In Denver, a temporary caregiver on probation for a felony robbery conviction was hired to fill a Covid-related staff shortage at a long-term-care facility. She stole an engagement ring and credit cards from Barbara Gust, an 86-year-old mother and grandmother who was dying of Covid. A few hours after Ms. Gust died, the caregiver used one of the cards to make a \$2.37 purchase at a local Wendy's restaurant, Denver Police Department records show.

In Miami, Shirley Gibson's property, which had been in her family for a century, was stolen by three people, who forged the octogenarian's name on a deed and sold it in a virtual transaction that had become commonplace during the pandemic, according to Florida law-enforcement officials.

In Memphis, Tenn., Alfred Mayes has new locks on his doors after his son, who had been living with him, became abusive, at one point hitting Mr. Mayes with a crowbar. Family members say the pandemic kept Mr. Mayes's other children and grandchildren from visiting regularly to see how father and son were coping.

Cases like these cropped up across the country during the pandemic, contributing to a surge in elder abuse, typically defined as an intentional or negligent act that harms someone 60 or older in a physical, emotional or financial way.

The number of elder-fraud victims increased 55% between 2019 and 2020, the latest data available, [according to a Federal Bureau of Investigation report on internet crime](#).

[Another study](#) conducted by Yale University researchers and released in January found that more than one in five older people living in homes or apartments, as opposed to facilities, reported abuse in April and May 2020, when all states had stay-at-home orders. That is an 83.6% increase over pre-pandemic prevalence estimates.

Amy Weirich, the district attorney general in the county surrounding Memphis, said her Vulnerable Adult Prosecution Investigation Team has reviewed 51 cases in the first nine months of this year, including the case of a 64-year-old caregiver who pleaded guilty to attempted second-degree murder after repeatedly striking an 83-year-old woman, knocking the dentures out of her mouth.

"In 2019, we didn't even have a dozen for the whole year," Ms. Weirich said.

Elder-abuse cases, which have been on the rise for years, [are expected to continue climbing even after the pandemic ends](#) due in part to the aging population and the shortage of trained and licensed caregivers. Low pay and burnout cause many to leave the field, both in private in-home care and nursing homes. Social connections, lost in the pandemic, are harder for older adults to restore, increasing the likelihood of isolation—a key risk factor in abuse.

The increase comes at great cost. [Abuse can lead to an earlier death for older Americans](#). It can also devastate families and undermine the financial and emotional well-being of older people.

Stay-at-home orders and social distancing measures left older adults isolated and at times sheltering with abusers, either family or caregivers who threatened to send them to a nursing home or cough on them if they didn't give them money.

"They used Covid as a weapon," said Joy Solomon, director of the Weinberg Center for Elder Justice in New York, which provides temporary shelter and support services to abuse victims and saw admissions double after stay-at-home orders were lifted.

Social workers and others who investigate reports of abuse and neglect couldn't meet vulnerable older adults in person. Short-staffed long-term-care facilities relied on questionable temporary workers. Law-enforcement budgets were cut.

Laura Mosqueda, a physician and director of the National Center on Elder Abuse, a national research center created by the U.S. Administration on Aging, is concerned not only about the increased volume but the intensity of abuse, as stresses compounded in the pandemic and left some caregivers overwhelmed. "It's not a big stretch for intense verbal abuse to turn into physical abuse as well," she said.

Some adult children took parents out of nursing homes, only to have them abused by in-home caregivers. Those who were unable to take their parents out of long-term care couldn't visit them to monitor care, said Jane Walsh, chief deputy district attorney in Denver, who oversaw the case involving Ms. Gust, who was robbed of her engagement ring and credit cards.

Ms. Gust lived in the memory-care unit of Carillon at Belleview Station in Denver, which opened in 2018 offering upscale independent living, assisted living and memory care for those with dementia. She and several other residents and staff members tested positive for Covid-19 in April 2020.

Her son and only child, Art Gust, his wife and three children, who frequently visited Ms. Gust and took her to dinner, watched her rapid decline through the window of her first-floor room. They noticed regular staff missing and new workers in Ms. Gust's room.

Ms. Gust died a week after she tested positive for Covid-19. While making funeral arrangements that morning, Art Gust received a notification that his mother's credit card was used at a local Wendy's four hours after his mother died. Several other charges appeared on the credit card at Walmart, dollar stores and a local used-car dealer.

His wife, Carolyn, told him that she had noticed her mother-in-law wasn't wearing her engagement ring, which she always had on. It was the only connection to her late husband of 55 years, Lysle Gust. Art Gust called the funeral home to see if his mother's engagement ring, appraised at \$13,800, was on her hand. It wasn't.

Police detectives with a unit that investigates elder abuse tracked the ring down to an EZ Pawn store. The same woman who used the credit card to buy a used car had pawned the ring for \$900. Police confirmed that the 29-year-old woman worked at Carillon, according to records from the District Attorney's office. The woman, Elizabeth Daniels, was arrested and charged with several crimes, including theft from an at-risk person and providing a false statement to a pawnbroker, according to police records.

At the time of her arrest, she was on probation for robbery and had a string of earlier arrests for driving under the influence, trespassing and identity theft, according to records from the Colorado Bureau of Investigation.

In April, Ms. Daniels pleaded guilty to theft of an at-risk person and was sentenced to two years of probation with a six-year suspended prison sentence. In September, a warrant was issued for her arrest for allegedly violating probation, according to the office of Ms. Walsh, the deputy district attorney. Ms. Daniels couldn't be reached for comment.

Officials from the Carillon say the woman wasn't an employee, but had been hired by Amada Senior Care of Colorado, a licensed staffing agency. The Carillon is under new management, which has replaced the executive director and put new managers in the memory-care unit.

Amada owner Ken Jenson said an outside firm conducts background checks. "We spend tens of thousands of dollars on background checks every month. She beat the system," said Mr. Jenson, adding that the woman gave him false identification and lied on the application. He said his agency paid for Ms. Gust's last month at the Carillon.

Ms. Gust's engagement ring sits in a box. "It should have been buried with her," Carolyn Gust said.

The pandemic opened other doors of exploitation, including the way many real-estate transactions moved online, which made it easier to steal from older, unsuspecting property owners. This is especially true of people who have no mortgage, meaning there is no lender exercising backup oversight.

Shirley Gibson, an 86-year-old retired librarian, went to the Miami-Dade County appraiser's office in May to pay property tax on lots in Coconut Grove, one of the first Black neighborhoods established in the Miami area. The lots had been in her family since the early 1900s, after her forebears immigrated from the Bahamas.

The clerk said the taxes on one of the lots had been paid by the new owner, a development company in New York. When Ms. Gibson said she never sold the property, the clerk gave her a copy of a deed, appearing to be signed by Shirley Gibson, indicating that property had been sold.

Her attorney, David Winker, said he recognized that the signature was forged. "It looked like a grade schooler's writing," said Mr. Winker, who took Ms. Gibson, a copy of the deed and samples of Ms. Gibson's signature to the police. The notary stamp and notary signature were also fake, Mr. Winker said. An investigation followed.

Police arrested three people and charged them with theft from a person 65 years and older, as well as other felonies including money laundering and an organized scheme to defraud. One has been released on bond; the other two are in the Miami-Dade Department of Corrections, according to the Office of State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle. They all have pleaded not guilty.

The buyer, which isn't suspected of foul play, was reimbursed by the company that insured the title.

The property, with a listed appraised value of \$212,000, was returned to Ms. Gibson, who never married and plans to give it to nephews and nieces.

"It's been in my family for over a hundred years and I want to keep it in my family," said Ms. Gibson.

Most cases of abuse involve a family member, which makes them harder to detect and stop, said Melanie Keller, a member of the Coordinated Response to Elder Abuse coalition in Memphis, which works with authorities to investigate cases of abuse, and provides legal, medical and emergency shelter services.

The number of physical-abuse cases handled by the Memphis coalition doubled between the first nine months of 2019 and the first nine months of 2021, according to Ms. Keller, who is also president of a home-health company that serves older adults.

Often, she said, family members don't recognize signs of abuse or don't think another family member would be capable of it. With the pandemic, they didn't visit older parents to see what was going on in the house.

That is what happened in the case of 78-year-old Alfred Mayes. "Everyone was trying to keep themselves and others safe," said Alfred's daughter, Mary Ross, an IT manager for the local sheriff's office. "We were still working and had fears and concerns about bringing in the virus to my parents, who were weaker."

Her 55-year-old brother, Theddious Mayes, had been living with and caring for their parents for several years. It was already a stressful situation before the pandemic, Ms. Ross said. Her mother had dementia and her brother, who took care of her until she died in March, grieved her loss. He had his own health issues, including a painful nerve condition, she said.

Ms. Ross, who has power of attorney for her father, began noticing that cable and property tax bills weren't paid. She said her brother told her their dad must have thrown them away. The local bank called Ms. Ross and said her dad withdrew money from his account on two consecutive days, which was unusual, she said. Her father played it down, saying he or her brother needed the money.

She recalls her dad saying her brother was speaking to him “very harshly,” but didn’t want her to say anything. “Leave it alone. It’s OK. I can handle your brother,” she recalls him saying.

In October, she visited her dad after work. He said his leg was hurting, and pulled up his pant legs revealing one limb with a deep gash and the other with a big knot. She asked him what happened. He replied that her brother hit him with a crowbar, she said.

“I was horrified. How could a sibling, a son, any child do this to a parent?” she said.

She drove her father to the hospital. While getting him out of the car, she encouraged him to tell the doctors and nurses what had happened.

A geriatric nurse on the elder-abuse team examined the wound and determined it was caused by injury, not a medical condition. Police questioned Mr. Mayes and his son, who admitted hitting his father twice, saying, “I hit him on his legs with a stick because he did not answer when I asked him a question,” according to an affidavit for an arrest warrant. The son was arrested on charges of aggravated assault of an elderly person and is in jail.

Theddious Mayes declined to comment, as did his public defender.

His father, who worked on the railroad his entire life, said he doesn’t understand why his son hit him. “I was surprised and hurting on my leg and in my heart,” he said. “I don’t really know why it happened.”

Ms. Ross, who is single, is moving in with her father. She changed the locks on the door, secured windows and is installing a surveillance camera. Social workers from the elder abuse coalition are in touch. She assures her dad that he always was, and remains, a good father. “You did your very best to show up in the world as a kind person,” she said.

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HEADLINE	12/28 Jailed on minor charges; left in a coma
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/28/nyregion/prison-fight-beating-jayshawn-boyd.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=New%20York
GIST	<p>NEWARK — Jayshawn Boyd, a 22-year-old with schizophrenia, does not remember the brutal jail attack that left him in a coma for more than two months.</p> <p>His mother, Nacolia Boyd, said she intended to wait until he regained more strength to tell him all the details about the beating by fellow detainees at the Essex County jail in Newark and the long road ahead to what his family hopes is a full recovery.</p> <p>“He’s making little words,” his father, Shawn Bouknight, said, “talking a little bit.”</p> <p>The Sept. 23 attack was stunning in its viciousness and duration.</p> <p>In surveillance video of the assault shared last month on social media, seven men in a jail day room are shown knocking Mr. Boyd to the floor and stomping his head. One by one, they return to pummel him with their fists, a microwave, a water cooler, a broom and an industrial bucket filled with bleach during an attack that continues well after Mr. Boyd appears to lose consciousness.</p> <p>Severe brain injury has left him unable to walk or eat solid food on his own, his mother said, and has damaged his short-term memory. Each of the men in the video has been charged with attempted murder.</p> <p>Seven detainees at the jail were charged with attempted murder after Mr. Boyd, in orange, was attacked in September. The beating was captured on surveillance video.</p>

The beating, which is under investigation by county prosecutors, lasted at least two minutes and 11 seconds without any intervention by guards, according to a copy of the footage obtained by The New York Times.

“There’s got to be accountability,” said a lawyer for the family, Brooke M. Barnett, who has filed a claim in advance of an expected lawsuit. “Something’s not right over there.”

Two years into a pandemic that raced largely [unchecked](#) through tightly packed correctional facilities across the country, staff shortages at state prisons and county jails have intensified, leading to mandatory overtime and [alarming gaps in security](#) at places like [Rikers Island](#) in New York City.

[Sixteen people](#) have died this year within New York’s correction system, mainly on Rikers, and the city is moving ahead with plans to [shut down](#) the notorious complex and replace it with smaller community-based lockups. In Philadelphia, with a jail population one-third the size of New York’s, there have been [18 deaths](#) this year, according to the Pennsylvania Prison Society.

“It should not be possible for someone to kill another human being in a jail,” said Claire Shubik-Richards, executive director of the society, one of the country’s oldest criminal justice advocacy organizations. “You have layers of security, in theory, and eyes everywhere.”

“And it should be really impossible,” she added, “to kill yourself.”

New York plans to [close six prisons](#) early next year as the number of people incarcerated in the state continues to decline. New Jersey has closed three, and the governor announced in June that he intended to shut down [the state’s only prison for women](#) after a midnight raid by guards left several women with serious injuries; the violence, which was caught on video, came a year after the Justice Department released a [damning report](#) that detailed an entrenched [culture of sexual violence](#) by guards there.

Because of drops in the detainee population, several of New Jersey’s 21 counties have also moved to close their jails and instead pay to house detainees awaiting trial or sentencing at nearby facilities.

The pandemic has added its own complications. To reduce crowding and slow the spread of the coronavirus, [roughly 700 people](#) were quickly freed from New Jersey jails.

Legislation later enabled the release of [2,258 inmates](#) from prisons the day after the 2020 presidential election in one of the [largest-ever single-day reductions](#) of any state’s prison population. Since then, nearly 3,000 additional people have been granted early release through the [emergency initiative](#), reducing New Jersey’s prison population by 32 percent since 2018, Gov. Philip D. Murphy’s first year in office.

At the same time, resignations and retirements among guards have increased, according to unions representing prison and jail officers. The unions attribute the attrition rate to pandemic-related fatigue, shifting attitudes toward law enforcement and restrictions in the use of [solitary confinement](#) as punishment for infractions, which they believe has contributed to an uptick in violence, including detainees throwing bodily fluids at guards.

It is unclear if staffing levels played a role in the delayed response to Mr. Boyd’s assault — the first of at least two serious recent attacks by detainees at the Essex County Correctional Facility.

Another spasm of violence came on Dec. 3, when Dan Milford Gelin, 27, died after being stabbed by another detainee, prosecutors said. A fellow prisoner has been charged with murder, and the county prosecutor’s office and the state attorney general are investigating his death. Mr. Gelin’s family referred all questions to their lawyer.

The next day, Essex County administrators announced that a private consulting firm had been hired to conduct a “comprehensive assessment” of the lockup.

“We need a fresh set of eyes to review our policies and standards,” the county executive, Joseph N. DiVincenzo Jr., said in a statement.

All the consultants named in a [news release](#) announcing the inquiry are retired law enforcement officials, leading prison justice advocates to question its validity and to call for an independent federal civil rights investigation into the recent violence.

“We don’t need another damn task force,” Nafeesah Goldsmith, a chairwoman of New Jersey Prison Justice Watch, said at a demonstration held to denounce the attack on Mr. Boyd. “We need all who stayed silent to be removed.”

A spokesman for New Jersey’s U.S. attorney’s office had no comment.

Leaders of the union that represents supervisors at the Essex County jail said that administrators and county officials had ignored repeated warnings that the facility was growing increasingly violent.

Paramedics or emergency medical technicians were called to the jail 169 times between January and June to treat either officers or detainees, up from 99 times during the same period last year, according to documents released by the union, the Fraternal Order of Police, Lodge 106.

Violence and resignations have also increased in state prisons, according to William Sullivan, president of a separate [union](#) that represents 6,000 New Jersey correction officers, the Police Benevolent Association, Local 105. About 450 officers resign each year, Mr. Sullivan said, and the pipeline for training new guards has slowed drastically.

“You’re seeing a lot more people leave sooner,” he said.

The Essex County jail, a green-sided, low-hung facility, sits in an industrial area of Newark. After years of protests by activists, county leaders decided this spring to stop holding undocumented immigrants awaiting court hearings at the jail, ending a lucrative, yearslong [contract](#) with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The lockup has held an average of 2,199 detainees each month over the last year, roughly 240 people fewer than the facility’s legal capacity, county officials said.

Most people in New Jersey’s jails are awaiting trial and presumed innocent, or have been sentenced to terms less than a year. The facilities are run by county administrators, and some have shut down operations as the number of detainees declined after New Jersey effectively [eliminated its system of cash bail](#), enabling most people to wait for their day in court at home, not in jail.

As part of a [cost-saving initiative](#), Union County — where Mr. Boyd lives and where he was charged with two altercations involving family members — has been paying Essex County to hold its detainees since July. (The population of the Union County jail had dropped 67 percent in 10 years, according to the county, and it expects to save \$103 million over five years by closing down most of its jail operations.)

With a documented history of schizophrenia, Mr. Boyd was one of the estimated [10 to 25 percent of incarcerated people](#) nationwide who suffer from serious mental illnesses in facilities poorly equipped to tend to their needs.

Last year, after being arrested on charges that stemmed from incidents with his family at their home in Elizabeth, N.J., he was transferred from the Essex County jail to a psychiatric hospital and later released. He was set to plead guilty to the charges — criminal mischief and unlawful possession of a knife — but missed sentencing, leading to a warrant for his arrest.

When he turned himself in, he was sent back to jail and placed in a traditional housing unit — a decision his lawyer and parents question, given his mental health history.

	<p>“It has taken something as brutal as this to expose the real dangers of what’s really going on behind these four walls,” Ms. Barnett said.</p> <p>Mr. Boyd’s family is hopeful that he will recover fully once he is healthy enough to leave a rehabilitation center.</p> <p>“He’s a fighter,” Ms. Boyd said. “They didn’t think he was going to make it this far.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 In-custody death of Kansas teen: homicide
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/28/us/cedric-lofton-kansas-police-death.html
GIST	<p>The death of a teenager who lost consciousness after he was handcuffed by personnel at a county juvenile center in Wichita, Kan., while lying facedown was a homicide, according to a Kansas medical examiner.</p> <p>The finding came several months after the authorities said that a preliminary autopsy suggested that the teenager, Cedric Lofton, 17, had not suffered life-threatening injuries while in custody.</p> <p>Mr. Lofton was arrested on Sept. 24 when the police were called to a house in Wichita after he began “exhibiting erratic and aggressive behavior” toward his foster family, according to an autopsy report from the Sedgwick County Regional Forensic Science Center.</p> <p>The police took Mr. Lofton to a county juvenile center, where he fought with correctional staff members, who placed shackles on his ankles, rolled him onto his abdomen and handcuffed his wrists behind his back, the report said. He appeared to calm down and made “snoring sounds” but when staff members checked for a pulse four minutes later, they could not find one, the report said.</p> <p>Mr. Lofton did not regain consciousness and died two days later, according to the report, which was filed in Sedgwick County District Court on Monday.</p> <p>“In my opinion, Cedric Lofton died as a result of complications of cardiopulmonary arrest sustained after physical struggle while restrained in the prone position,” wrote Dr. Timothy S. Gorrill, the chief medical examiner. “The manner of death is homicide.”</p> <p>The employees in the corrections department who were involved in the episode have been placed on paid administrative leave pending the results of the district attorney’s investigation, Sedgwick County officials said in a statement.</p> <p>County officials said they could not comment on the case, citing the “active investigation.”</p> <p>The office of the county district attorney, Marc Bennett, said in a statement that it was reviewing the autopsy results and the “lengthy investigation” conducted by agents of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation and the Sedgwick County Sheriff’s Office.</p> <p>“When a charging decision has been finalized, the public will be notified,” the prosecutor’s office said.</p> <p>The sheriff’s office declined to comment. Jeff Easter, the county sheriff, said in September that a preliminary autopsy had found that Mr. Lofton did not suffer life-threatening injuries at the center.</p> <p>The Kansas Bureau of Investigation said the investigation into the teenager’s death remained “ongoing.”</p> <p>“Once the investigation is completed we will share all investigative findings with the Sedgwick County district attorney, who will make charging decisions,” Melissa Underwood, a spokeswoman for the agency, said in an email.</p>

Mr. Lofton was a high school senior and planned to move to California after graduation to pursue a musical career, said Andrew Stroth, a lawyer based in Chicago who is representing the teenager's biological parents and his older brother.

"He had a future and a life that was taken away by the authorities in Wichita," Mr. Stroth said.

The family has been trying to get answers from officials for months about the death of Mr. Lofton and have been frustrated by what they see as a "lack of transparency" from law enforcement, he said.

"You have an unarmed 135-pound teenager in custody that, without cause or provocation, is killed," said Mr. Stroth, who is representing the family along with Steven Hart, another lawyer in Chicago.

Mr. Stroth added: "The autopsy report is significant because it shows objective evidence about what happened."

He declined to say why Mr. Lofton was in foster care. The report described Mr. Lofton as "well-nourished" and "well-developed."

The safety of subduing suspects facedown, or putting them in a prone position, [has been questioned](#) after the deaths of several people who were restrained in such a manner.

A growing chorus of experts has argued that research saying the position does not lead to deaths is flawed and has been applied too broadly.

Mr. Lofton ran away from his foster home on Sept. 21, according to the report, and returned on Sept. 24 around midnight.

The police had planned to take him to a "behavioral health unit" at a nearby hospital, the report said.

But when Mr. Lofton "assaulted one or more of the officers," they took him to the Sedgwick County Juvenile Intake and Assessment Center, the report said. He was charged with four counts of battery on a law enforcement officer by the Wichita police, according to Sedgwick County officials.

Mr. Lofton was placed in a cell at 2:45 a.m. A correctional staff member took him out of the cell at 4:20 a.m. and brought him into the lobby. He became "uncooperative and agitated" and two staff members tried to restrain him.

Mr. Lofton freed his arm and punched one of the staff members in the head, the report said.

"Additional staff members" became involved and shackled his ankles, the report said, citing video footage of the incident. Mr. Lofton kept struggling and at 5:08 a.m. he was handcuffed and placed facedown.

When staff members could not find a pulse, they began performing chest compressions and called for help. He was taken to a nearby hospital where "brain death" was pronounced on Sept. 26, according to the report.

Mr. Lofton also tested positive for Covid-19, the report said, and his face and several parts of his body were covered with bruises and abrasions.

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HEADLINE	12/28 Denver gunman online trail of hate
SOURCE	https://www.thedailybeast.com/sixth-person-dies-after-deadly-denver-killing-spree-police-say?ref=home
GIST	Lyndon McLeod, who police say killed five people during a deadly rampage in the Denver area, was an author dedicated to alt-right philosophies, including masculine supremacy, contrarian COVID-19 beliefs, and targeted violence against the "weak."

McLeod appears to have operated a plethora of Twitter and Instagram accounts under the alias Roman McClay, which he used for his three-book series *Sanction*. The book series, with its first book described in an Amazon review as “eloquent reflections on dominance hierarchies, psychology, technology, nature, violence, anatomy and physiology, sexual morality, drug use, politics, and a whole mess of stuff,” follows a character named Lyndon McLeod, a persona named after its author who “commits 46 murders” in the book and one he seemed to allow to seep into his real life.

The Daily Beast found that at least two Twitter users identified McLeod and McClay as one and the same months and even years before the shooting.

In his posts, McLeod seemed to frequently use excerpts from his work to comment on current events, such as a COVID misinformation meme on Twitter featuring Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg and Microsoft founder Bill Gates. The [meme, posted on May 1 last year](#), featured the billionaires “discussing” their approach to the pandemic, with Gates being thanked for mandatory vaccinations while Zuckerberg was congratulated for an “injectable nanoworm.”

McLeod, who was killed by a Lakewood police officer Monday after shooting her in the abdomen, captioned the photo with a quote from one of his characters in his series: “It’s not really a worm so much, however I understand the point.”

He also gleefully indicated that some people required violence to be addressed. While discussing a 2014 YouTube video titled, “Mike Tyson DESTROYS Reporter!” on Twitter, McLeod, as McClay, blasted the “passive aggressive” reporter and praised Tyson for using “Direct Aggression”—all before hinting at threats of violence for the “WEAK.”

“This is basically the plot to my stupid book,” he [wrote in April 2020](#). “Our entire society is made up of shitty little fucks who insult badasses & get away with it because law enforcement & social norms protect the WEAK from the STRONG. I’m over it.”

“The weak better buckle up... s**t is about to get real,” he wrote.

During a [press conference Tuesday](#), police confirmed that McLeod, whose records showed he owned his own tattoo parlor called Flat Black Ink, targeted each of his victims.

Right-wing rapper and social media personality [Nzube Olisaebuka Udezue](#)—known as Zubu—hosted McClay on his podcast to discuss *Sanction* in 2019. The host claimed the book was “currently blowing up Twitter,” though he admitted he had not read it.

Police said during a Tuesday press conference that McLeod had previously been investigated in 2020 and 2021, but they did not comment on what he was investigated for. Kurt Barns, a spokesman for the Denver Police Department, told The Daily Beast he was not aware of a connection between McClay and McLeod but would forward the information to investigators.

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HEADLINE	12/28 Family of teen killed by LAPD speaks out
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/family-14-year-fatally-shot-los-angeles-police/story?id=81971514
GIST	<p>The family of 14-year-old Valentina Orellana-Peralta, who was fatally shot by Los Angeles police at a clothing store on Dec. 23, is demanding answers from the department.</p> <p>"To see a son or daughter die in your arms is one of the pains -- the greatest pains and most profound pains -- that any human being can imagine," said Valentina's mother, Soledad Peralta. "Now, our sweet angel has left us forever. Please give us strength, Valentina."</p> <p>The family is being represented by civil rights attorney Ben Crump, who has also represented the families of Trayvon Martin, George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery.</p>

Valentina was killed on Dec. 23 [while holiday shopping with her mother](#) at a Burlington clothing store in North Hollywood, California. She was fatally struck by a stray bullet in a dressing room, while holiday shopping with her mother, when LAPD officers opened fire on a suspect who had allegedly committed assault with a deadly weapon in the store.

Valentina's mother and father wore signs Tuesday that said "justice for our daughter."

"The pain of opening Christmas presents for her that were delivered for Christmas Day cannot be described," said Valentina's father, Juan Pablo Orellana Larenas, in Spanish at Tuesday's press conference. "Now, those gifts will be brought to her grave because she's gone."

"It's like my heart was torn out," he said.

The LAPD published 911 calls, radio transmissions, body camera footage and surveillance video four days after the incident. The department's policy is to release video of incidents like police shootings within 45 days.

In a Dec. 27 statement, LAPD [Chief Michel R. Moore said](#), "This chaotic incident resulting in the death of an innocent child is tragic and devastating for everyone involved. I am profoundly sorry for the loss of this young girl's life and I know there are no words that can relieve the unimaginable pain for the family."

He added, "My commitment is to conduct a thorough, complete and transparent investigation into the circumstances that led up to this tragedy and provide the family and public with as much information as possible."

According to the LAPD's body camera footage and 911 audio recordings, several callers notified 911 dispatchers of a possible shooting in progress at the store. One 911 caller can be heard asking customers to evacuate and telling the dispatcher that he is breaking things.

The suspect, Daniel Elena-Lopez, did not have a gun at the scene, according to officials. He had a metal bike lock that was allegedly used to assault a woman and break glass.

Elena-Lopez carried his bicycle to the store's second floor, where he set it down and wandered around trying on clothes, according to surveillance footage provided by LAPD. He was confronted by a store employee about his bicycle when he broke a computer monitor with his metal bike lock.

According to surveillance footage, Elena-Lopez repeatedly hit the glass railing by the store's escalators and walked around the store erratically.

The footage shows Elena-Lopez attacking a woman on the escalator with his bike lock. She escaped and left the store. He then attacked another woman but she also fled.

Later, according to the footage, Elena-Lopez repeatedly beat a third woman with his bike lock on the second floor of the store. As she tried to escape, he dragged her toward the dressing rooms. She was injured and bleeding from the attack when police arrived, officials say.

Armed officers then entered the store, confronted Elena-Lopez and fatally shot him, according to LAPD. A bullet is believed to have pierced a wall behind the suspect and hit Valentina.

"We heard screams and we sat down, and hugged, and started praying," said Peralta, through a translator. "When something hit my daughter, Valentina, it threw us to the floor ... and she died in my arms."

She added, "There was nothing I could do."

Officials say Valentina was out of sight from the officers.

	The Los Angeles County medical examiner-coroner declared Valentina's manner of death as a homicide, with the cause of death being a gunshot wound to the chest.
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HEADLINE	12/28 Denver gunman 'extremist views'?
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/dead-officer-injured-killing-spree-denver-police/story?id=81966638
GIST	<p>A shooter allegedly went on a "killing spree" across the Denver area Monday night, killing five and wounding two others, across at least four locations, officials said.</p> <p>The suspect also died following an exchange of gunfire with police, officials said. Prior to the shooting, federal law enforcement was aware that the suspect, Lyndon Mcleod, harbored extremist views and had a history of psychiatric episodes, multiple law enforcement sources confirmed to ABC News.</p> <p>Law enforcement is now scouring the suspect's writings, both physical and online, and trying to determine what led up to the shooting spree, sources said. Police said they had investigated the suspect in 2020 and 2021 for previous incidents, but he was not arrested either time.</p> <p>All of the victims were known to Mcleod through personal or business relationships, police said at a press conference Tuesday evening. Police confirmed on Tuesday that a fifth shooting victim had died, but did not specify which person died of those who were injured.</p> <p>The incident began at about 5 p.m. on Monday in downtown Denver, where three people were shot, Denver Police Chief Paul Pazen said. Two women were killed and a man was injured, he said.</p> <p>The shooting appeared to start with a tattoo parlor as the target, sources said, citing preliminary findings of the investigation. State business records obtained by ABC News indicate Mcleod used to own a tattoo business in Denver.</p> <p>Gunshots were then reported at a second location, but there were no injuries, he said. That location, on Bannock Street and Sixth Avenue, was where Mcleod owned a tattoo business as recently as 2017, according to state business records. A van was also set on fire in a nearby alley, allegedly by the suspect.</p> <p>Police received a call moments later about a third shooting nearby, where one man was killed, Pazen said. "Denver police officers identified a vehicle associated with this incident. There was a pursuit that ensued," Pazen said. "There was an exchange of gunfire between the individual, the suspect, here, and our officers."</p> <p>Lakewood police then located the suspect's vehicle at a shopping center, Romero said. The suspect shot at officers, before fleeing on foot to a nearby store and then a Hyatt Place hotel, he said. The suspect shot a clerk at the hotel, Romero said.</p> <p>The suspect shot and injured a Lakewood officer while fleeing the hotel, Romero said. The officer is in stable condition but will need to undergo more surgeries, police said.</p> <p>The suspect and officers then exchanged gunfire, and the suspect was shot and killed, Romero said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/28 Denver gunman targeted some victims
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/police-gunman-denver-killed-targeted-victims-81981451
GIST	<p>DENVER -- A gunman who went on a shooting rampage in several locations around the Denver area, killing five people and wounding two, targeted his victims based on previous personal and business dealings, authorities said.</p> <p>Lyndon James McLeod, 47, was also killed Monday night after he shot a police officer who confronted him in a busy shopping district in the Denver suburb of Lakewood. The officer managed to fire back at McLeod, killing him, Lakewood police spokesperson John Romero said Tuesday.</p>

Matt Clark, commander of the Denver Police Department's Major Crimes Division, said the gunman knew most of his victims but not the last person he shot — a clerk in a hotel in Lakewood's Belmar shopping area. Sarah Steck, 28, who died of her injuries Tuesday, was apparently targeted because of a dispute with the hotel, not with her, Clark said.

McLeod once owned a business in Denver called Flat Black Ink Corp. at an address that is now World Tattoo Studio, according to records from the Colorado Secretary of State's Office. A man who answered the phone at World Tattoo Studio hung up after he was asked about McLeod on Tuesday evening.

The first shooting took place at a tattoo shop less than a mile (1.6 kilometers) from that address. Four of the victims, including three who died, were shot at two tattoo shops in the Denver area.

Denver Police Chief Paul Pazen said during a news conference that McLeod was on the radar of law enforcement and had been investigated in both 2020 and 2021. He declined to say what McLeod was investigated for but said charges were not filed against him.

The shootings started around 5:30 p.m. in central Denver along Broadway, a busy street lined with shops, bars and restaurants, where two women were killed and a man was injured but expected to survive, police said. Soon after, McLeod forced his way into a home that also housed a business nearby, pursued the occupants through the building and fired shots, but no one was injured, Clark said. Then a man was shot and killed in a home near Denver's Cheesman Park, he said.

Later, Denver police chased the vehicle believed to have been involved in the shootings, and an officer exchanged gunfire with McLeod, Clark said. McLeod was able to get away, fleeing into Lakewood, after gunfire disabled the officer's cruiser, he said.

Just before 6 p.m., the Lakewood Police Department received a report of shots fired at the Lucky 13 tattoo shop. Danny Schofield, 38, was killed there, Romero said.

When officers spotted the car suspected of being involved in the shooting at the Belmar shopping area — where shops line sidewalks in a modern version of a downtown — McLeod opened fire and officers shot back, Romero said. He ran away and allegedly threatened some people in a restaurant with a gun before going to the Hyatt House hotel, where he spoke briefly with Steck, the clerk, before shooting her, he said.

About a minute later, the Lakewood police officer saw McLeod and ordered him to drop his weapon. She was shot in the abdomen but fired back at him, Romero said.

The wounded officer, whose name has not been released, underwent surgery Monday night. She is expected to make a full recovery.

Family members identified one of the other victims Tuesday as Alicia Cardenas, 44, the owner of the Sol Tribe tattoo shop, where the first shooting happened.

Alfredo Cardenas told KMGH-TV that his only daughter owned her first tattoo shop when she was 19 and had worked in the Broadway location in Denver for 15 to 20 years.

"Very gregarious, very friendly, but she was a very determined person," he said. "She knew where she was going."

Alicia Cardenas is survived by her 12-year-old, Alfredo Cardenas said.

On Tuesday, candles, flower bouquets and some containers of fruit rested in the doorway of Cardenas' shop as people, including her fiance, Daniel Clelland, stopped by to remember a woman they said cared for so many.

	"I don't know why someone would do this," Clelland said.
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